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 deprecating 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 existing institutional structures and traditional patronage, Boucher devised his own ways of artistic functioning, matched by his particular technical skills, which enabled him to extend his trace 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 execution was so much his own that it was instantly and unmistakably recognizable even in a fragment of a painting.9 This observation evoked a tradition and an elite and foreign audience, Diderot’s account of the artist’s activities, such as his involvement in innovative forms of theater and music, his relation to his patrons, especially Madame de Pompadour, his appropriative practice of exoticism, and his embrace of reproductive technologies.10

My discussion in this chapter seeks to expand and recast the definition of Boucher’s modernity by focusing 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 manifested himself—the key question being how—in his productions. It was something of a cliché during the eighteenth century that Boucher’s work reflected his personality. This association revolves 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. “Bourne sensitive, likeable and voluptuous, he almost always saw himself drawn toward the Graces whose painter he was generally recognized to be,” stated Antoine Bert, expressing a widely shared opinion, in his obituary of the artist.11 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, sexual pleasure.12 The sensual pleasure connection was explicit in Jean-François Marmontel’s statement that Boucher, whom he knew from gatherings at the salon of Madame Geoffrin, “did not see the Graces in a good place; he painted Venus 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.”13

Whether dismissive or sympathetic, these commentaries were underwritten by 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 iconography 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 language may be seen to speak of—or for—its producer, Boucher. What did it mean to say that, as Diderot asserted, his fare 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.14 Associated with the discourse and institutions of the Enlightenment, such as the Academy and the Salon, this view of modernity has to be understood in the context of the exhibition of his paintings, exhibited at the Salon, he did not fully embrace its principle of publicness, which manifested itself in the emergence of art criticism as the voice of the public opinion. His attitude is evident in the image that Boucher entered the struggle to define the mission of contemporary painting but that could also be taken to represent how he understood his own pictorial practice. In a frontispiece that he designed for abbé Le Blanc’s pamphlet published 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 Idleness, Ignorance, and Drunkenness (fig. 1.4).15 A version of Melancholia, a gagged woman, invented, defeated, and seated by her canvas, personifies Painting, while the menacing hoods of harpies and asses that surround her represent the critics as incompetent intruders into the domain of art.

research on the various aspects of his practice, a different kind of Boucher has begun to emerge.16 We now have a fuller picture of his relation to the artistic, cultural, and social contexts of his time and a more thoroughly documented record of his engagements in different domains of cultural production. Moreover, we have been presented with the idea of Boucher as an essentially modern artist. Contradicting the long-standing historiographic tradition of understanding his work as a negative foil of artistic modernity—an example against which novel and ambitious aesthetic practice defined itself in eighteenth-century France, and the opposite to what, later, modernism came to stand for—several scholars have explored the thoroughly modern aspects of the artist’s activities, such as his involvement in innovative forms of theater and music, his relation to his patrons, especially Madame de Pompadour, his appropriative practice of exoticism, and his embrace of reproductive technologies.17

But what was it about Boucher’s work, about his role as an artist, that could be seen as exemplary of modernity? As Diderot’s account of the artist’s activities, such as his involvement in innovative forms of theater and music, his relation to his patrons, especially Madame de Pompadour, his appropriative practice of exoticism, and his embrace of reproductive technologies.18

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Boucher’s 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. 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 interpretive 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 evoke these conditions’ own partly imaginary status. For the market in Boucher’s time was not only an empirical reality but also a cultural construct. 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 recep tive 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 shares 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.

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 how the 1708 edition of Antoine Furetière’s Dictionnaire Universel succinctly defined it. It is precisely under “tact” that one could find the main entry on touch in Diderot and Diderot’s Encyclopédie, a very lengthy discussion of the body and the self.27 As the entry’s author, Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, specifies, tact...
confidently hope to be pleasing, “ agreed an author. “Anyone who knows how to be accommodating can discern in all things the best means of pleasing others, and to be able to put them into practice.”44

In his Système de la Nature, Baron d’Holbach spoke of the “moral tact” as a capacity for distinguishing between good and reprehensible acts, which is dark and difficult for those who are not practiced in it, gradually becomes clearer and is acquired through life, and is acquired through 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…”45 It requires that we penetrate people’s unspoken thoughts and, very often, their most closely guarded secrets.46 Key for the acquisition of this magic skill were two strategies. The first was souplings (suppless, or adaptive flexibility of manner), for ‘the persona . . . of an honnête homme . . . must transform itself as the occasion warrants.”47 The second, insinuation, was also of strategic importance according to many writers concerned with the ideal of honnêteté.48 In Mérimé’s understanding, it amounted to the capacity to “work subtly beneath the surface of the other” a term with physical and psychological resonances.49 These behavioral terms aptly describe the technical process that proved crucial for Boucher’s artistic formation. I am referring to his engagement, at the very outset of his career, in the reproduction of the work of Antoine Watteau. Boucher won the Prix de Rome in 1723, at the age of twenty, but due to exceptional circumstances he was not able to go to Italy to complete a course of study at the French Academy in Rome until later.46 Instead, he continued to work in Paris in the printing trade, where he had been engaged before, chiefly in the workshop of the printer Jean-François Cars. Having come into contact (possibly through Cars) with Jean de Jullienne, the patron, friend, and great admirer of Antoine Watteau, Boucher was engaged in the project of reproducing the oeuvre of Watteau, who died in 1721.52

Other artists were also hired for the project, but Boucher emerged as its leading contributor, executing roughly 195 out of 350 etchings after Watteau’s drawings for the Figures des acteurs dramatiques de la comédie italienne et des figures de divers acteurs de la comédie italienne (1726).53 What is particularly remarkable about Boucher’s work is that Watteau’s original drawing of it is not in Jullienne’s collection, which implies that the younger artist’s re-creations of Watteau’s work were not in Jullienne’s collection, which implies that the younger artist’s re-creations of Watteau’s work served as models for him and other artists participating in Jullienne’s reproductive enterprise.54 No doubt in recognition of the quality of his contribution, Boucher was also asked to execute the frontispieces for the two volumes of the Figures: a portrait of Watteau based on Boucher’s drawing after the artist’s self-portrait and an allegorical composition titled The Graces at the Tomb of Watteau, etched by Boucher after his own design.55

The drawing, now in Berlin, was most probably made by Watteau.
after his own painting to serve as a modello for his etching (fig. 1.7). 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 actors.) 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 suggest that he too transferred the design directly onto the plate by reinscribing the contours.64 In effect, we witness Boucher’s double insertion of himself into another artist’s trace — into which one inserted the etching needle, piercing through the layer of varnish and thereby effectively getting under the skin of the trace. (This aspect of the procedure is shown in three stages in the upper part of Plate III, fig. 1.9.) Once the design was etched, the plate was submerged in nitric acid (not-forte, the French term for the whole procedure), which bit the areas exposed by the needle.

The intense and prolonged exposure to Watteau’s art installed a host of motifs, figures, gestures, and poses in the artist’s mind, providing him with a visual repertory from which he drew throughout his career.69 Yet Watteau’s effect also worked on a deeper, morphological level, manifesting itself in Boucher’s approach to the process of making. First, through repeated limning of someone else’s trace, Boucher acquired a certain bodily routine, a habit of hand.70 It allowed him to interiorize not only a stock of images but also another artist’s touch. (Remember that tact was then understood to be an acquired quality, not an innate one.) This was not simply a matter of learning to mimic Watteau; it also fostered the development of a new flexibility, mobility, and adaptability in Boucher’s own manner through the exercise of his predecessor’s touch. Descending Boucher’s efficacy and skill in acquir ing himself of his task, Pierre Jean Mariette noted that “his light and lively touch seems to have been doing much else.”65 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.66 One aspect of etching that distinguished it from other reproductive techniques was its subtly dialogical quality: the way in which it required the insinuation of the other’s trace while allowing him a considerable freedom regarding the precise mode of re-creation. As described by Cochin (in his influential eighteenth-century edition of Abraham Bosse’s treatise), etching involved transferring the original design onto a varnished coated plate, usually by first rubbing the reverse side of the drawing to be reproduced with a sanguine stick or pencil until its outlines became visible. That side was then applied to the varnished plate and retraced with a blunted needle.67 The resulting outlines had to be fixed to prevent accidental effacement. This was done by heating up the plate. (The tools used in this process, from etching needles to torch and furnace, are represented on Plate II illustrating the entry on etching in the Encyclopédie [fig. 1.8].)68 As a result of the heat, the greasy sanguine particles melted slightly and fused with the varnish, producing shadowy outlines — phantoms of the original traces — into which one inserted the etching needle, piercing through the layer of varnish and thereby effectively getting under the skin of the trace. (This aspect of the procedure is shown in three stages in the upper part of Plate III, fig. 1.9.) Once the design was etched, the plate was submerged in nitric acid (not-forte, the French term for the whole procedure), which bit the areas exposed by the needle.


Figure 1.8 Antoine Watteau, Italian Troupe, ca. 1715–16. Eching Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

Figure 1.9 Antoine Watteau,Italian Troupe, ca. 1715–16. Engraving Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

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less accomplished etcher could easily have become inarticulate blottches. Moreover, Boucher’s repeated reproduction of Watteau’s artistic trace amounted to an exercise in aesthetic complaisance, a training in morphological accommodation. Reproductive etching is a particularly suitable medium for this kind of training. Despite the relative freedom of movement it affords the etcher’s hand, this mode of reproduction is not as free as drawing on paper. A hand moving a needle through a varnished surface encounters resistance. Moreover, one has to pay close attention to prevent losing track of the original trace. Whether one was following the sanguine sticks contours previously transferred onto the plate and fused with the varnish or, according to another method of image transfer, connecting the dots one had made at the strategic points of the original design (such as those we find in Watteau’s drawing of the Italian Troupe), the etcher obviously had to proceed at a pace slower than that afforded a draftsman. It is this slight deceleration of touch necessitated by the etching process that, given the extent and scale of Boucher’s assignment, must have enhanced the dexterity of his hand and helped develop an unusual receptiveness of his line. One can speculate that this receptiveness had not only kinesthetic and aesthetic dimensions but a subjective one as well. It may be assumed to have induced a peculiar kind of artistic self-reflexivity: a recognition of the embeddedness of one’s own trace in that of another, and thus of the trace’s always dialogical nature. Reproductive etching renders this aspect the more salient in that the remnant of another artist’s trace is literal—a reproduction. Routinely performed, this act of reproduction may be likened to a psychic operation wherein the etcher’s mark is inscribed by a memory-trace, a latent counterpart of another artist. My argument is that the young Boucher’s prolonged performance of the quasi-mechanical task of transposition of Watteau’s work created the ground for both an aesthetic and psychic transfer: it generated an internal mechanism of self-articulation based in the recirculation of traces, and made the artist aware of it. In other words, Boucher’s discovery of his touch through the process of reproduction of another artist’s touch led him to develop an imaginary model of self-identity that was inscribed by alterity. On this level, Boucher’s tact is not only the capacity to skillfully—tactfully—transpose someone else’s touch, but also an ability to anticipate and recognize an otherness within one’s own, thus implying a certain measure of distance from it. Prompted by the reproductive process to think of himself as a system of graphic relations, Boucher acquired a capacity for self-abstraction. This technically grounded self-discovery was related to a lesson of a more general nature that Boucher learned by working on Watteau: a lesson in reproduction as the means of constructing an artistic oeuvre and, through it, of establishing oneself as an author. Julienne’s endeavor not only addressed itself to discerning amateurs and artists; it had a more specific purpose that crystallized in the course of the publication, namely, the construction of a body of work that would stand in for Watteau. Unlike the similar reproductive project of the eminent art collector Pierre Crozat that focused on the artists from the past, the Recueil Julienne was devoted to a single contemporary French artist. It was in order to represent this artist as a modern master, and to convey the specific nature of his achievement as a draftsman, that Julienne, himself an artist maquettiste, undertook his reproductive project. Julienne’s preface to the first volume of the Figures de différents caractères suggests as much. Explaining his unconventional decision to publish Watteau’s drawings studies—a kind of work that was not widely considered to be of interest at the time—Julienne made the point that these drawings were radically different from the productions of other artists. This novelty had to do with Watteau’s idiosyncratic method of working in which detached figure studies, rather than studies of the whole composition, had a preeminent role in constructing an image. Unmoored from its context, Watteau’s figures illustrated, in Julienne’s mind, the quintessence of his style and also stood in a special relation to the artist himself. The preface implied that although the drawings illustrated different characters, their style and function pointed to one artistic personality—that of Watteau. Julienne’s publication was a symptom of the larger process of cultural invention of the “author” in this period. Although it was not legally recognized in France until the end of the eighteenth century, the “author” emerged as an increasingly important category in the field of artistic and cultural production. Commercial initiatives such as Julienne’s—and later those of the dealer Edmé Gersaint, who introduced a catalogue raisonné—performed a key role in this process. At once artistic and commercial, these venues were the very site of elaboration of the new meaning of the artist as the function of his/her work, and, as such, they were the catalysts in the broader process of the cultural invention of authorial personality. It is precisely as an author that Watteau appears in the frontispiece to the first volume of the Figures de différents caractères (fig. 1.12). Etched by Boucher after Watteau’s self-portrait, now lost, the frontispiece represents the artist in half figure, holding a porte-crayon in one hand and a portfolio of his drawings in the other. As such, Watteau’s image performs a demonstrative function—Ecce auctor!—but also, implicitly, raises the question of authorship as a matter of the relation between the artist and his work (the portfolio), or between the artist’s body, draped in fur-lined coat, and its traces (the porte-crayon). What highlights and complicates this question is the presence of another author—Boucher—who has insinuated himself into this representation through a savvy game of proper names. Thus, underneath the etched image, we find a standard, that is, doubled inscription referring to the division of labor on the print: “Watteau pinxit” on the left, “Boucher sculpsit” on the right. Boucher, however, repeats this pair of signatures within the image, placing one on each side of the cover of the portfolio held by Watteau, and thus creating the ambivalent impression that the works contained in the portfolio are of joint authorship. The quartet of signatures graphically conveys Boucher’s eagerness to mark his contribution to Watteau’s oeuvre but also his self-consciousness about his own authorial status acquired during this reproductive exercise. The internal repetition of proper names moves the author from the frame into the image itself, that is, from the discursive (legal or commercial) margin of the work—a position of someone who holds the copyright privilege to it—to the position of someone recognizable
within the work itself, in its very morphology.86 Directly involved in the manual fabrication of the image, the author, Boucher suggests, is someone who may therefore be conceived as its material effect. Taken together, the signatures represent a specific historical moment in the development of the cultural meaning of the author, a moment in which, besides the notion of authorship as a legal and commercial mechanism (copyright), a sense of the author as a morphological function of his or her work, that is, as an effect of his/her bodily trace, began to emerge.

The very fact that Boucher chose the form of signature to hint at his authorship is telling. At the time when he scribbled his name on the frontispiece, the signature was in the process of acquiring its modern function as an autograph of a person, a unique bodily trace. Although this process has been long in the making—its origins in France, as Beatrice Frankekel has demonstrated, reached back to the sixteenth century—it was only in the early eighteenth century that the written form of a proper name turned into a fully person-alized sign, a mark of an individual.87 Yet in order to function as a reliable proof of identity, the newly valued signature also entailed a constraint on individuality: one had to always sign in the same way. It was precisely the visual consistency of its written form, its reproducibility, that turned the proper name into a sign of individual identity. A product of one’s own individual mode of writing, the signature had to acquire legibility, grace, and elegance through training. Writing manuals flourished. The Encyclopédie published a separate entry on écriture understood as a fine style of mark-making, with a series of plates illustrating the different aspects necessary for achieving it: the proper position to be assumed by the writer, the suitable desk and seat, the appropriate writing implements, as well as the right manner of holding the pen.88 Illustrations were also provided for the preparatory exercises recommended for the hand to gain a certain kinesthetic fluency (fig. 1.13), for training in writing capital letters, and for developing smooth cursive connections. The adoption of a signature as the preeminent mode of self-identifi-cation, and the new emphasis on proper writing style, inaugurated a new understanding of identity based on the idea of the consistency of the self capable of generating reproducible signs through the mastery of its body and hand.89

It is exactly such an attempt at self-consistency through the mastery of the hand that we witness in Boucher’s tremulous signature scratched inside the frontispiece. Its uncertain, provisional form, as if the hand were still rehearsing a movement about to become a manual routine of the signing self, suggests the young artist’s trial to assume his trace as the means of self-identification.90 But the signature’s strategic placement on another artist’s oeuvre points also to its intuitive recognition of the work itself as a site of identity: a product of the artist’s trace that was, in and of itself, understood as a signature, that is, a reproducible sign of a particular kind, forever receptive, always capable of generating reproducible signs through the mastery of its body and hand.90

signatures on the Watteau “self-portrait” not only challenged (if playfully) Watteau’s exclusive rights to the image, it challenged, too, the idea of a single person as the origin of the work. It suggested that the field of representation consisted of endlessly reproducible traces without origins and gestured toward recognition of the author as the effect of this understanding of the trace.

Thus, if the Figures des différents caractères established Watteau as an author, it also helped Boucher to develop his own distinct sense of authority. The publication also suggests, however, a major difference in the self-understanding of the two artists. Watteau, who never signed his works, defined himself as an artist through the trope of the mask, the perception of identity as a masquerade being repeatedly thematized in his work.91 For this reason, his elusive art, and the artist himself, have often been associated with the social and cultural ideals of honnêteté.92 Boucher’s success in repro-ducing Watteau’s work, and the soupslese with which he did it, may well be seen as a feat of poli-tesse befitting an artist-gentleman. Yet it is evident that Boucher’s tact in this matter amounted to something radically different. His success in the project of reproduction had to do with Boucher’s capacity for (self-)abstraction, a capacity to which his whole practice testifies, if in different ways. The suppleness of his fingers—praised, if through inver-sion, in Panard’s quatrain—was predicated on a partial renunciation of identity, a recognition of the image as a field already inscribed by the trace of an other that Boucher declared him ready to assume. The reproduction of Watteau enabled him to develop a sense of his own trace as an authorial sign of a particular kind, forever receptive, always accommodating, a line harboring the memory of another line, a touch inscribed by an other. This is, in sum, how Boucher acquired his tact.

My point is that the artistic importance of the Watteau project for Boucher must be measured not in terms of “influence”—though there is much of it discernible in Boucher’s oeuvre—not in terms of “identification” with the work or with its author, but in terms of its deep morphological impact. The experience of someone else’s work allowed the artist to interiorize not only a stock of images but also another artist’s touch and, through it, to develop a distinct sense of his own. Moreover, the lesson of Watteau—the lesson of soupslese and of the bene-fits of reproduction—also provoked Boucher to embrace a mode of operation that was different from the one customarily adopted by ambitious artists pursuing an academic career. This was a mode motivated by a concern with self-reproduction in the realm wherein Boucher imagined his place as an artist, not in the narrow precincts of art, but in the wider world of material goods produced by globalization commerce.
The Commercial Imagination

For long now this painter has been called a painter of fans. — Grimm

It has often, and justly, been emphasized how productive, and hard working, Boucher was and how diverse his activities were. He was reported to have worked “more than twelve hours a day from the moment in his childhood when he first picked up pencils until the very end of his life;” and his versatility was both admired and decried by his contemporaries. Thus, in his otherwise effusive obituary of Boucher, Restout spoke in mildly reproachful tones about the artist spreading himself too thinly by taking up the type of assignments—painted overdoors, carriage panels, even the design of the then-fashionable cut-out marionettes—that were not worthy of his talent (fig. 1.14). While Restout blamed the frivolous taste of the time for the unwelcome expansion of Boucher’s practice, he also indicated that, aside from financial needs, it was a result of the artist’s “too complaisant imagination.”

Restout’s comment raises the thorny issue of the commercial dimension of Boucher’s practice. Part of a wider trend to disregard or condemn this aspect of the artist’s work by his contemporaries—a view epitomized by Friedrich Melchior, baron von Grimm’s sarcastic dismissal of Boucher as the painter of fans—Restout’s remark implies that involvement in commercial design was deemed incompatible with artistic ambition. Such a view was symptomatic of a more general anxiety about the rising importance of the market as a factor in an artist’s talent (fig. 1.14). Thus, in his obituary of the painter, Breit echoed Restout’s mildly reproaching argument about Boucher’s commercial expansion, though he linked it more directly to the lack of proper patronage of painting, a condition that, in his view, led to the degradation of the arts in general.

This historical view has long lingered in modern accounts of the painter’s work wherein commercial projects, notwithstanding the increased scholarly attention they now receive, tend to be considered as peripheral to his pictorial enterprise. Thus, for example, although our sense of how extensive Boucher’s involvement in commercial design was has considerably grown, this knowledge has hardly inflected our understanding of his aesthetic project at large or his artistic identity. Yet even the most cursory view of Boucher’s entire output challenges the belief that his work was commercially motivated. The sheer number of his decorative designs invites us to reassess the relation between these projects and Boucher’s practice at large. The fact that the artist persisted in his commitment to the domain of commercial production despite his successful and financially rewarding career as a painter gives us all the more reason to do so. Boucher was not, pace Grimm, just a painter of fans, but this epithet raises a question of how to think about the artist’s extensive and persistent engagement in the design of commodities and how to understand the role of this engagement in his career and in the development of his self-conception as an artist.

Boucher’s entire enterprise could be said to have been permeated by the market: it defined his approach to art making as such and its effects were discernible throughout his diverse productions. Moreover, it seems to me that, behind Boucher’s artistic expansion and diversification, there was a logic irreducible to the financial gain derived from it. Through commercial repetition, reproduction, and circulation of his work, Boucher enlarged the definition of what constitutes an artist’s oeuvre and positioned himself as an artist within a domain exceeding the academically defined category of “art” (without, however, abandoning the latter). In this sense, he brought the lessons gained from his commercial engagement with Watteau’s work to another level. Under the rubric of Boucher’s name a whole new material realm of goods (not only images) came into being, an effect that, far from being a refraction of Boucher’s practice, was inherent in its very aims. It was indicative of the artist’s ambition to situate his work, and himself, within the new realm of commercial modernity.

Commerce was in Boucher’s times an important sector of human activity but it was also, increas- ingly, a context that absorbed the entire society, profoundly redefining the modes in which it functioned and imagined itself. One indication of the role of commerce in shaping the collective self-imagination was the double meaning of the term in its eighteenth-century usage: “commerce” referred to buying, selling, and exchanging goods, but also, metaphorically, to social intercourse of all kinds. The stock phrase “le doux commerce” which was used at the time to convey both the benefits of trade and a mode of social interaction illustrates the connection between the two meanings. The question is how the increased importance of the commercial model of social functioning affected the way in which artists imagined themselves and their role in society.

Restout’s evocation of Boucher’s “complaisant imagination” as a form of the commercial spread of his practice gives us a hint of an answer to this question insofar as it may be taken to suggest the artist’s recognition of the market as the condition of artistic existence and functioning. “My taste is to please,” Boucher was once reported to have said. While we should not, of course, take such statements at their face value, the phrase indicates not only the artist’s willingness to oblige his patrons, but also his readiness to anticipate and respond, as an artist, to a more abstract commercial demand. I am calling this ability a “commercial imagination” in order to emphasize the way in which the market shaped Boucher’s practice as an economic and aesthetic principle, to recover, that is, how his tact operated on the commercial dimension of his practice. Boucher’s ability to identify and feed the market for his work, and even for the by-products of his working process, has been recognized and studied by...
modern scholars. Drawing has been seen as the chief domain in which Boucher exercised this awareness. As it has been established, from the 1730s, Boucher developed an approach to drawing as an autonomous and marketable form of art. This is how one may define the numerous “presentation drawings” produced by Boucher himself after his own work and destined expressly for sale, some of them already framed. The highly finished pastel drawing of the Boy Holding a Parsnip (1738) that, rather than being drawn from life (as were Watteau’s motifs of this kind), was based on Boucher’s own earlier painting of a Kitchen Maid and a Young Boy, is one example of the artist’s self-pastiching practice (figs. 1.16 and 1.17). A drawing of the Naiads with a Triton, based on the figures appearing in the lower right foreground of his tapestry cartoon for the Rising of the Sun, is most likely an illustration of a related strategy used by Boucher, namely, his “recycling” of already existing preparatory studies as presentation drawings (fig. 1.18). Fully conscious of the market for such by-products of the working process, the artist would often take a drawing he had originally made as a study and embellish it by adding highlights and other details in order to sell it.

Boucher’s habit of reelaborating his own work was related to the increasing vogue for collecting autonomous drawings witnessed in France from the 1740s on. Boucher was an important figure in this phenomenon. He set the trend for exhibiting drawings as independent works of art at the Salon and, among the draftsmen feeding private collections, he was probably the most prolific. The Naiads with a Triton belonged to the renowned drawing collection assembled by Barthélemy-Augustin Blondel d’Aizin-cour, who reputedly owned five hundred sheets by Boucher, and whose wife, Catherine-Charlotte-Edmée de la Haye des Fosses, was also an avid collector of drawings.

This new status of the drawing as a collector’s item also entailed an aesthetic adjustment, namely, a change in execution and drawing style. From the 1730s, Boucher began adapting his style to enhance the display quality, or what Beverly Schreiber Jacoby has aptly termed the “wall power” of his drawings. The legibility of forms became the most important objective. To obtain it, Boucher reduced the number of figures, enlarged their size in relation to ground, and used fewer accessories. A red chalk drawing of a Reclining Nude whose body has been turned into an elegant arabesque stretching diagonally across the sheet of paper is one early example of this new display-oriented style (fig. 1.19). A later Reclining Nude, once in the collection of Catherine the Great, illustrates the development of this style toward even greater figural autonomy and more manifestly bold handling (fig. 1.20). Made expressly to be sold, such drawings were often already framed—or prefabricated as “collector’s items”—in the artist’s studio. For this purpose, Boucher employed one of the main scholars of his time.
most sought after frame makers of the period, Jean-Baptiste Glomy, whose distinct mounts, with their gold fillets and green tinted borders, enhanced the jewel-like quality of the drawing, signaling the shift in its status from a record of creative process to a decorative object.135

By creating drawings for the market, Boucher also generated a demand for these objects, putting pressure on his own production. This is what Breet, among others, hinted at in his obituary of the artist when he mentioned the collectors besieging Boucher’s studio in search of works they had seen in other amateurs’ holdings as the main factor behind the artist’s prolific output: the number of Boucher’s drawings circulating on the market increased to more than ten thousand.136 (By contrast, Watteau’s entire drawing output has been estimated to comprise only between two to four thousand drawings.)137 Some drawings, like the Naiads with a Triton, were quite elaborate, others less so, being done quickly in an effort to meet the growing appetites of the collectors. One of Boucher’s students, Johann Christian von Mannlich, who was in his studio from 1746 to 1768, described the artist occupied with drawing every morning while he took hot chocolate in his cabinet. “He could never make enough of these works for the amateurs and the dealers who would pay him two louis for a piece.”138

The pressure of demand manifested itself also in the artist’s studio practice. As Mannlich, again, reported, the artist routinely asked his students to copy his own drawings that he would then merely retouch—and thus authorize—before selling them as his own.139 The Hertford House Triton, based on the figure in the lower left of the Rising of the Sun, that, in its broad treatment simulates rather than achieves modeling of the body, is one example of such studio practice.140 This approach generated problems, as the note Boucher felt obliged to publish in Mercure de France of May 1755 indicates. In it, Boucher disowned a series of prints produced by his frequent collaborator, the engraver Charles Duflos, and circulating on the market. Purportedly based on Boucher’s original drawings, the prints were denounced by the painter as based instead on the second-rate work by his “least advanced pupils, without the participation of the author of these prints,” and he added that he “can neither recognize nor acknowledge his work in such unholy copies.”141 The affair speaks to the risks involved in running the studio the way Boucher did. Notwith-


standing these problems, Boucher was evidently willing to “share” his trace, an attitude that left his work vulnerable to a potential confusion between the original and a copy. Boucher’s embrace of reproductive print for the purpose of disseminating his work was, as Scott has asserted, a clear indication that the artist recognized its potential as a career- and reputation-building tool.142 Scott and others have documented Boucher’s sustained reliance on professional printers, with whom, notwithstanding the episode with Duflos, he collaborated throughout his career. From the 1790s, he entrusted his drawings to Gilles Demarteaau, who specialized in crayon-manner engraving, a technique exceptionally well suited for the reproduction of drawings in that it allowed for the imitation of both the color and the texture of the crayon trace, which etching could not provide.143 Offering a simulation of drawing, it was also relatively inexpensive.144 Together with two other new techniques, the fully colored engraving, and engraving in pastel manner, mastered by another enterprising printer, Louis-Martin Bonnet, the crayon manner engraving allowed for the circulation of the facsimile reproduction of the artist’s work to a wider market.145 While both Demarteaau and Bonnet practically built their careers as printers on Boucher’s designs, as Kristel Smentek has demonstrated, enabled their business to flourish—they, in turn, helped his work acquire a broader commercial appeal and reach a higher degree of recognizability. This entailed some alteration of the artist’s original designs. Demarteaau modified Boucher’s drawings to create more auton-

ous compositions suitable for the print market. He added two figures looming in the background and altered the shading in his widely reproduced print of the Naiads with a Triton (fig. 1.21, see fig. 1.18).146 Similarly, Bonnet, advertising his pastel simulation of Boucher’s Flora, suggested that it was, in a sense, an improvement on the original.147 That Boucher entrusted his work to these printers and accepted their revisions indicates he was not only well aware of the advantages of reproduction as the means of propagating his work but also open to the contribution of others to the formation of what was widely received as his style and success.148

The point about Boucher’s self-marketing strategies may be extended to incorporate not only the artist’s expressly self-reproductive practice in drawing and prints but also other kinds of artistic activities of a more or less openly commercial nature, and the different mediums he embraced, that allowed him to circulate his touch in the much broader domain of things. The very beginnings of Boucher’s career were commercial. His first employment, by Jean-François Cars, was for the design of thesis prints and book illustrations, and his second most significant early employment was the work he did for Jullienne.149 Long after Boucher had made a name for himself as an academic painter, however, he continued employing his pen and brush in diverse commercial projects. Although other artists too engaged in commercial design, the scope and extent of Boucher’s activities were unusual. He produced designs for the tapestry manufacture at Beauvais, where his complex, multifigured compositions on mythological, exotic, and pastoral subjects defined the artistic profile of the establishment between 1734 and 1755 (figs. 1.22 and 1.23).150 He also worked for the Gobelins manufacture of which he became the artistic director (source: peintre sur les ouvrages) in 1735, a position that gave him the opportunity to exert aesthetic influence over, if not to dominate, the entirety of French tapestry production for roughly thirty years.151 Boucher’s involvement in porcelain design was also equally important in quality and scope. His models were vital for the development of the French porcelain manufactories at Vincennes and Sèvres, and his aesthetic influence has been judged all pervasive.152 The multiple purposes of Boucher’s designs are illustrated by his Little Gardener, which served as the model for a biscuit sculpture of Le Jeune Suppliant and for painted decoration on a tea service.153 Boucher’s name became synonymous with a certain aesthetic that defined French porcelain in the late eighteenth century, a phenomenon epitomized by the commercial term “goût Boucher” used in the eighteenth-century sales catalogs of the Sèvres products.154 Theater design was another domain to which Boucher contributed significantly, designing for the Opéra, with which he was involved repeatedly—between 1737 to 1739, 1745 to 1748, and again from 1761 to 1766, when he became the Opéra’s artistic director—and for the popular venues, the Opéra comique...
a key factor in social and cultural self-definition, collective and individual, social and psychological. Paris was the center of an explosion in luxury consumption. The luxury trades had thrived in the capital city since the sixteenth century due to the growing affluence of its inhabitants, the dense concentration of artists and artisans, and its abundant labor force. But it was in the eighteenth century that the market for luxury came to prevail in the city’s economy, generating new modes of consumption and new desires for consumer goods. The luxury trades that flourished in Paris and its environs at the time—wearing porcelain manufacture, gold- and silversmithing, clock making, bookbinding, and the manufactures of objects for interior decoration or intimate use, such as screens and fans—were precisely those for which Boucher provided his designs. As many scholars have recognized, the proliferation of available goods irreversibly altered the relation between people and objects, generating the new habits—and the new ethics—of conspicuous consumption, including the consumption of art. New buying patterns emerged that signaled the taste for novelty and luxury spreading within a wider social spectrum. That the society as a whole experienced a consumer revolution was not lost on contemporary commentators. Voltaire in his essay on luxury and the Théâtre de la Foire, with which he was involved on at least three documented occasions between 1741 and 1751. A design preserved at the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire in Narbonne illustrates the initial stages of this type of work (fig. 1.24). Last but not least were designs for various decorative objects and ornaments published in compenda, many of them by Huquier. Such were the two volumes of the Recueil de Fontaines, projects for fountains based on drawings commissioned from Boucher and published in 1736 and 1738 by Huquier. There were designs for screens (fig. 1.25), for cartouches (fig. 1.26), for vases, for decorative clocks, and for fans, such as the elaborate design for a fan leaf with a mythological scene, Bacchus and Ariadne, now at the National Gallery of Canada (see fig. 1.26). A number of designs for funeral monuments indicate Boucher ventured into this domain as well. Finally, there are a number of miscellaneous decorative designs, published individually or in series, such as the Suite de Cinq Sens and Suite de Quatre Éléments, which he had executed for Huquier and, and Les Délits de l’Élégance, published by Audran in 1724. The scope and ambition of Boucher’s designing endeavors clearly indicate that the artist systematically and self-consciously employed his talent in the design of desirable things, seeking to position himself as an artist in the emergent culture of consumption. The term refers to both the economic condition tied to the increased circulation of luxury and consumer goods in eighteenth-century France and the concomitant shift in the ways in which French society functioned and conceived itself. It describes a moment in which the entire society, not only elites, came increasingly to depend on material possessions and when the idea of possession itself became written in 1736, observed: “Thus one sees in England and in France, by hundred channels circulating abundance. The taste of Luxury enters all (social) ranks.” The proliferation and circulation of objects inevitably changed ways of living but also the symbolic meaning of the usage of things. The appearance of popular and semiluxury items and the circulation of secondhand luxuries not only blurred the distinction between ordinary and luxury consumption but also contributed to the confusion of social signs that produced, in turn, a gradual erosion of social distinctions. The spread of consumption marked the advent of what Daniel Roche has called the “culture of appearances,” referring not only to the new mode of dressing as a representation of a new system of values but also to the emphasis on display and performance as a pervasive social phenomenon. The theatricalization of society and of the individual rooted in the practices of consumption was one of the key issues in contemporary critiques of commercial modernity. Another key aspect of the culture of consumption was the increasing commercialization of culture itself to an unprecedented degree, culture in the eighteenth century began to appear as something to be had for money, and its forms, venues, and the media through which it was disseminated spoke of its commodified status with increasing clarity and eloquence. The way in which rococo as a new elite style of interior decoration was transformed through print reproduction into a widely disseminated commodity is a key example of this process. If rococo was indeed a “modern taste,” it was because of its immersion in the marketplace, a quality recognized by its promoters and critics alike. Boucher was the major contributor to the new world of goods, his designs being used for both ends of the consumption spectrum: for high-class, expensive luxury products, such as tapestries and snuff boxes, and for such semiluxuries as fans. What is most important, his commercial endeavors were inseparable from his artistic practice at large. There are many examples of the interconnections between Boucher’s painting and commercial designs. As the Grâce Éternel biscuit statuette of 1711 based on a design—most likely Boucher’s own—focused on the central group in his Automne Pastoral (1749) indicates, the artist had no qualms about adapting motifs from his large-scale paintings for decorative purposes (figs. 1.27 and 1.28). Nor did he shy away from...
“recycling” his high-end designs for smaller and more affordable objects; for example, he reused the composition of Bacchus and Ariadne from his tapestry cartoon for the Beauvais series of the Loves of the Gods in his design for a leaf fan (figs. 1.29 and 1.30).29 Nothing, though, better illustrates Boucher’s self-consciousness about these interconnections than his Chinese Gallant (fig. 1.33), a painting en crapaudine bleu that simulates a commercial object, a porcelain tile. Epitomizing the deliberate elision of the distinction between “high” and “low,” the work flaunts the contrast between its considerable size—a format of the large cabinet picture or a mid-size history painting—and its technique of the small-size ornamental tiles, between its elaborate frame normally used for paintings and the purely decorative use-object it contains. Putting both genre painting and the decorative object in quotation marks, this work conveys an idea of repetition and the interchangeability of designs within different—and reversible—modes of practice, a kind of cross-fertilization that challenged the sense of discrete material and cultural status of the products of Boucher’s hand. As such, it indicates that, beyond the models made expressly for manufacture, the artist conceived of none of his work as exempt from reproduction and dissemination in other mediums. Boucher’s repeated reuse and recirculation of motifs within his own output signals his embrace of novelty and variety, the key qualities of commercial wares, as the paramount principles of his own production. What this circulation of motifs also indicates is the self-consciousness of the artist as their producer, a fact made conspicuous in the Chinese Gallant. Through their mobility within his practice, these motifs established a network of interconnections across different forms and media, a web spun by the same hand and pointing to the intermediate persona of the author.

Boucher’s contribution to the dissemination of the goût Boucher has frequently been acknowledged, but has not been recognized that it was unmistakably recognizable even in a fragment of a painting. How it seems to me that Boucher’s frenetic productivity was motivated by a desire to reproduce the artist himself, to paraphrase Bert, “in a thousand different forms.” Yet it seems to me that Boucher’s distinctive process was an instrument of commercial self-reproduction. It entailed, though, reproducing oneself in a specific way, as a system of traces recognizable across a wide spectrum of things, an abstraction identifiable with a specific individual—a visual style that came to function like a signature. Diderot referred only to Boucher’s pictorial practice when he observed that the painter’s style of execution was so much his own that it was unmistakably recognizable even in a fragment of a painting. However, this is, effectively, a description of the effect that made Boucher identifiable not only in paintings and drawings but also in the wider domain of objects. From his hand emerged a blueprint for an entire material realm of luxury and semiluxury commodities—and a consistent aesthetic of the thing as a delightful possession—bearing his stamp. It is thus that Boucher himself came to function as a style—the goût Boucher,” as the advertisement for Sévres porcelain put it—and that his entire commercial production could be understood as his oeuvre, a kind of authorial manufacture.30

This is, let us note, different from saying Boucher’s practice amounted to a kind of exquisite craftsmanship, a view epitomized by Georges Brunel’s observation that “Boucher made pictures like a cabinet-maker makes furniture.” Yet what differentiated the artist was precisely this expansive authorial ambition that pointed toward a new kind of commercially grounded aesthetic individualism, a self-consciousness about style as a form of representation of an individual, if in a specific, abstracted sense. Boucher’s mobility across different materials and mediums and his reliance on the reproducibility of his forms, emphasized by Scott, distinguished him from a traditionally understood artisan working, as did a cabinet-maker, in a single medium.32

If Boucher’s artistic imagination was, as Restout claimed, “complaisant,” it was because it was commercial, in a specific sense. It implied the artist’s capacity to imagine his work—and to conceive of himself as an artist—on an arena broader than the sphere of either pictorial or artisanal production, in a realm of circulation and exchange of the new kind of desirable objects that redefined the contours of social and individual experience. Such capacity entailed a very different mode of artistic operation from that determined either by the structures of traditional patronage or by official artistic institutions, such as the Academy. It called for a recognition of one’s place as an artist in a shifting, unpredictable field of expectations defined by an other—the consumer—a category far less specific than an individual patron, or the state, and less articulated or knowable than the salon public. The commercial artist had to be able to imagine the consumer his or her product was likely to attract, and, to some degree at least, foresee the subjective level at which this product would be received, and which it would have to solicit—the level of desire and fantasy. In other words, the work itself had to anticipate the subjective taste—the desire and fantasy—of this “other.”

This is what Boucher’s design practice makes evident, what it represents besides and beyond the immediate use-function of his individual designs. What we see repeatedly manifest in the very structure of his projects is the artist’s willingness to draw for an other, to provide outlines for someone else’s...
work, as Watteau once provided for him, or for something else—a tapestry, a vase—to materialize within these outlines. This inclination to share the visual field with another amount, though, not only to the literal sense of preparing the ground for another artist or craftsman, be it a printmaker or a porcelain painter, to execute, reproduce, or fill in his design, but also to an ability—at once aesthetic and subjective—to anticipate the imaginary addressee of his products. The empty frames, such as those Boucher designed for the Livres des Cartouches published by Huquier, the frontispieces awaiting inscription, may in their very form be taken as a representation—an allegory—of this ability (see fig. 1.26). They announce themselves structurally as a field of expectation for someone or something that will use, complete, and/or give sense to it. Behind many of Boucher’s projects, such as those for fountains and screens, there was no specific patron or specific occasion for which these forms were intended but rather an abstract idea of demand for such forms, or their potential marketability. Such designs may be taken as illustrations of a more general principle of accommodation that links Boucher’s multifarious productions and is built in the very structure of his work, part and parcel of its morphology and its function.

Boucher’s designs testify to a certain model of sociability associated not only with the culture of consumption but also to the form of subjectivity that went with it. “Drawing for an other” is not unlike “dressing for an other” and analogous manifestations of the investment in display characteristic of the culture of appearances.165 Repeatedly setting the stage for his invisible consumer, Boucher’s work represents a form of consumer subjectivity that is rooted in the performance, a self that operates in, and depends on, the social theater of another person’s opinion or gaze. This capacity for solicitation and accommodation of an other, in multiple senses of the term, constitutes the general principle that linked Boucher’s multifarious production. Thus, far from constituting the margins, however lucrative, of his artistic practice, design offered Boucher an arena on which to exercise his most significant talent, namely, his tact. Tact must be recognized, therefore, as at once a commercial and a subjective strategy; one that served to accommodate others—clients, consumers, the market—but also Boucher himself. It was a matter of complicity understood not as a gratuitous act of politesse but as a vital strategy for professional and personal functioning. As an artist, Boucher himself was that modern subject, who, as Rousseau was to put it, “knows how to live in others,” who thrives in the others’ gate or trace—that of his engravers, publishers, collectors, but also the consumers of the objects shaped by his designs.

There was, however, a double edge to Boucher’s brilliant exercise of tact in his design projects, his work’s capacity to anticipate and accommodate the other being ambivalently accommodating of himself. Some projects speak to it more eloquently than others. Boucher’s designs for cartouches and frontispieces, with yawning voids at their center, may also be seen as indirect self-representations of their producer: not as an enigma (the large tropes of Watteau’s oeuvre) but as an abstraction, which verges on disappearance. The costs of representing and disseminating oneself through such forms become most evident in Boucher’s Group of Children around a Drapery, a drawing for the frontispiece to the volume of his own designs as engraved by Pierre Aveline, where the name “Boucher” appears like a ghost, hardly inscribed in the empty field of the cartouche (fig. 1.32).166 Its faint appearance suggests the cartouche as the phantomic image of Boucher—his invisibility as a mercurial subject of his productions. How an artist could employ his skills in designs for an increasingly commercialized society is evident. But how was one to paint in the era of consumption? A series of large-scale mythological paintings produced by Boucher for the Parisian lawyer François Derbais offers an instructive answer. Executed between 1732 and 1734 for the billiard room of Derbais’ hôtel particulier on rue Poissonnière, these paintings illustrate the boldness with which Boucher sought to situate himself as an aspiring artist in the commercial culture of modernity.167 Much indicates that Boucher used this commission, which he may have instigated, as a shortcut to the public arena after he returned from Italy, when, awaiting admission to the Academy as a full member, he was eager to make himself known.168 Muriel reports that Boucher’s desire for recognition was so strong that he would have painted these canvases for nothing.169 Another commentator, Papillon de la Ferté, asserted that “these ingenious compositions attracted a throng of admirers, who publicized the talents of the young artist.”170 Whether, as some scholars have suggested, the patron wished to attract the attention of other potential private patrons, or, alternatively, to seek state commissions from the tapestry manufactories, the Derbais paintings signal that Boucher was able to recognize, perhaps even create, a career-launching opportunity for himself, rather than simply counting on institutional protection (a lesson he may have learned from winning the Prix de Rome without actually getting the travel funds stipulated by the prize).171 Moreover, they suggest his recognition of the commercial potential for his art, which, far from causing a deterioration in quality imputed later by some of his critics amounted to a significant aesthetic innovation.172 Not much is known about François Derbais, except that he was the owner of a sculptor, Jeanne Derhais, from whom he had inherited a small fortune, that he was a lawyer—an avocat au Parlement—and that he owned a collection of paintings.173 Because of his relative anonymity and, because, as the contemporary sources indicate, Derbais most likely did not commission the paintings but rather accepted Boucher’s offer, one may well think of him as a consumer of art rather than a patron, that is, a surrogate for the idea of individual commercial demand rather than someone actively engaged in defining the program of the commission. It is also relevant that due to the expansion of commerce in luxury goods and the social spread of consumption, the hôtel particulier had lost its status as a strictly aristocratic dwelling, and townhouses such as Derbais’s were becoming consumer’s abodes par excellence.174 They were being perceived, above all, as representations of an individual (un particulier), whose identity was articulated through consumption. The Poissonnière district (le Faubourg Poissonnière) where Derbais’s hôtel was situated, was one of the new areas of the city where the building of such dwellings began to flourish in the first decades of the eighteenth century and continued to the century’s end.175 The shift in perception of the building left its mark on its form, as the representation of social distinction became less important than the expression of the owner’s individuality. Interior planning became more particularized, evidencing a greater variety and greater specialization of spaces.176 Emphasis on comfort, privacy, and the individualization of space, even spatial idiosyncrasy, became most important as the building increasingly strived for the architectural definition of its owner as a person. Although we do not possess adequate information about Derbais’s dwelling to have a clear idea of its appearance, the very mention of the “billiard room” in his posthumous inventory indicates a functional division of rooms typical of modern individually dwelled houses.177 The painting and decoration of such rooms were crucial for their functional definition, thus turning the hôtel particulier into a new field of commercial opportunity and competition for both artisans and artists. The stakes were high, in part because of the promise of high profits such a decorating assignment provided. As the historian Michael Stürmer has pointed out, by the 1780s, when the boom for luxurious townhouses in Paris peaked, the cost of interior decoration amounted to as much as 75 percent of the building budget.178 But the cultural stakes were also considerable, raising the question of aesthetic survival of the painters who, if it was felt, were being pushed out of the domain of interior decoration by skilled artisans. It was feared that the new

**PERSONAL MYTHOLOGIES**

But if luxury is to become personal, materialistic luxury, it must be predicated on an awakened sensuousness.

—Werner Sombart, _Luxury and Capitalism_
decorative schemes designed by leading architects, such as Germain Boffrand and Ange-Jacques Gabriel, left no place for painting. By the mid-eighteenth century the complaint about painting having been replaced by the non-representational aspects of interior decoration was a common trope of the anti-rococo reaction.

The building boom, like the more general disem-ination of luxury goods, also generated a consider-able amount of anxiety about aesthetic taste. The figure of the new Croesus indulging in a building folly in Voltaire’s Temple of Taste, written at about the time when Boucher painted his pictures for Derbais, exemplified this worry. Linked to the shift in the cultural and social status of the hôtel as the dwelling of an elite consumer was not only fear about the possible loss of space in which painters could exercise their art but also the emerging concern about the potential loss of its aesthetic quality. An opportunity to decorate the interior of an hôtel particulier thus posed a challenge for a painter in more ways than one.

In choosing Derbais’s abode as the arena of his pictorial debut, Boucher must have recognized the commercial opportunity as well as aesthetic challenge it offered him as a painter, a challenge that amounted to a redefinition of decorative painting as a genre. It is reasonable to assume that in offering his services to Derbais, Boucher was not only eager to make himself known but was also determined to carve out a space for his art in the new domain of luxury consumption of which the hôtel particulier was a prime site.

The decorative set Boucher produced for Derbais consisted of five large canvases representing mytho-

1.33. François Boucher, Mercury Confiding Bacchus to the Nymphs, 1732–33. Oil on canvas. The Wallace Collection, London.


logical subjects: a large painting of The Birth of Venus (ca. 1733), a pair consisting of Mercury Confiding Bacchus to the Nymphs (fig. 1.33) and The Rape of Europa (fig. 1.34), presumably done in 1732–33 and 1733–34, respectively; and a set of vertical pendants, Venus Requesting Arms from Vulcan (1732) and Aurora and Cephalus (1733) (figs. 1.35 and 1.36). He also painted an overdoor with putti (Amours) for the bil-liard room and four overdoors for the stairway of the house with images of children engaged in activ-ities representing the four seasons. The size of the mythological paintings was important—it was the first time Boucher produced canvases of such large format—as was the scale of the project. Moreover, the vertical pendants were the first works signed and dated by Boucher. This is significant, indicating not only the importance the young artist evidently attached to these canvases but also his rising self-consciousness about himself as an author, that is, as someone engaged in the production of an identifiable, chronologically ordered oeuvre.

Reinventing the language of large-scale decorative mythologies, Boucher’s canvases for Derbais were most notable in their effort to redefine the effect of a decorative painting as a desirable material object. The vertical pendants, Venus Requesting Arms from Vulcan and Aurora and Cephalus, accomplished this task most persuasively. The multifigural depic-

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Nudity is the single most defining feature of these figures. Although the painter includes some of their requisite attributes—such as Vulcan’s forge tucked in under the cloud beneath the figure of Venus, or the watering can that refers to the dew associated with Aurora as the personification of Dawn—iconographic specificity is not his major concern. Nor is he interested in a reliable spatial definition of the locale that Lemoyne, in the Berger pendants, felt obliged to provide. His protagonists appear in a quasi-abstract setting, filled with an amorphous substance and cluttered with disparate fragments and few attendant figures. No logic governs this shallow and overcrowded space, wherein bodies and things float in defiance of gravity. Their artful disarray has, of course, been carefully composed—in each canvas, the prominent diagonal alignment of the main figures is counterbalanced by the opposite, more latent diagonal arrangement of their attendants, attributes, and assorted fragments—but this composition is quite arbitrary, in the sense that it does not correspond to any narrative development nor establish a clear hierarchy of meaning among the elements of the painting.

In their lack of narrative emphasis and their careful choice of poses and gestures, a development of body language that will become typical of his mythological repertory. And yet, notwithstanding these rehearsals, the major signifying task of these large-scale nude figures seems to be not narration or expression but the transmission of an erotic charge. With margins cropped and attendant figures pushed to the side, the protagonists’ bodies seem pulled close to the painting’s surface, an effect enhancing their erotic appeal. It is the woman’s body that Boucher clearly privileges in its erotic mission. Both Venus and Aurora are placed in the limelight, hovering above their partners whose admiring gazes relay the desiring look of the spectator. From the airborne cloud on which she is seated, the woman presides over, and speaks for, the space of eros that these canvases flesh out. (This is also true of the other three mythological paintings wherein the woman’s body functions as a sensual focus of the composition even when this is not warranted by the iconography. Thus, in Mercury Confounding Bacchus, the nympha Cyane, lying before Mercury is staged so prominently as to be easily taken for the main protagonist of this scene.)

This is, though, an eros of a specific kind. Scholars have noted the “brazen sensuality” of Boucher’s vertical pendants. Yet let us note that while erotically suggestive, the interaction between the figures is by no means explicit. There is no smooching, no avid grabbing of bodily parts, as in Hercules and Omphale painted by Boucher in the same period (1731–34) for a different purpose (fig. 1.40). In Venus and Vulcan, the sexual encounter, evoked by Vulcan’s not-so-suitable sword and the piece of fabric that flows prominently out of Venus’s genital “source,” seems suspended, or deferred, their nude bodies appearing somehow inert, focused on self-display rather than action. In Aurora and Cephalus, the goddess’s body languidly slides down onto her lover’s, her pose marking the diagonal descent of the entire composi-
tion, a tumultuous cascade of bodies and things tumbling down across the canvas. Not only does Boucher depart from the standard iconography in rendering Cephalus reciprocating, rather than resisting, Aurora’s love, he also, in a sense, deconstructs Aurora by turning her from an agent of seduction into a passive token of a pictorial commotion in which both she and her lover seem to have been caught. It is precisely this interpretation of the female body as the face of a movement of the entire pictorial surface that I want to emphasize most visibly by the positioning of the female figures but also by the manner of rendering their soft and snowy flesh as a palpable but exceptionally smooth surface on which the viewer’s eye may glide unobstructedly—the opposite of, say, the late Rembrandt’s barnacled flesh that traps or saps the gaze.

The erotic function of the woman in these pendants is to define the painting itself as a token of desire, a material object that carries an explicit promise of sensuous gratification likened by the mode of execution to the appeal of female flesh. The corporeal dominance of women in the two paintings must be seen in terms of this strategic function. So too must be their underplayed iconographic specificity and the generic quality of their bodies that repeat almost the exact same body type, not only in the pendants but in the other three canvases painted for Derbais as well. (This “cloning” effect may have been responsible for confusion about the subject of Aurora and Cephalus, which, at the moment of its sale later in the century, was taken to represent Venus and Adonis.193) The distinct peculiarity of the women in both pendants, and of the female protagonists in the three other canvases, is aligned—or confused—with Venus (they share the same bodily type—a small head with blond hair decorated with pearls, smallish breasts, and plump thighs)—a type Boucher was to modify later, aiming at a greater robustness and firmness of the flesh in an effort to enhance its sensual appeal. This alignment is all the more significant if we realize that Venus was not only a figure of sensual pleasure but was also to represent other forms of eros. For example, in the seventeenth-century depictions of the Kunstкамер, Venus often figured as an allegory of the desire to own and amass rare objects.197 It is precisely the association between erotic and other kinds of desire that Boucher conveys in these paintings by his suggestive treatment of objects, notably the attributes of male figures in each scene. Placed prominently in the lower left corner of each pendant, the armor forged by Vulcan and Cephalus’s hunting tools vie for the viewer’s attention almost like a third protagonist in each scene. (This impression is particularly strong in the pieces of armor at Vulcan’s feet, which seem strangely alive, as if they were inhabited by some invisible warrior.) With their palpable textures and vivid colors—as in Cephalus’s black leather quiver with its golden trimmings and blue satin strap—they appear like collectibles sold at the time by the marchands merciers, the compressed and cluttered space of these paintings may indeed resemble a shop window display. (That Mercury, who featured prominently in the Birth of Bacchus, was not only the messenger of gods but also the patron of merchants may also be of relevance to the commercial appeal of this set of paintings.) Yet in their overstaged mode of presentation, they appear not only as luxury objects but also as tokens of desire involved somehow in the erotic scenarios represented here. Note, moreover, that though they belong to men, these attributes are compositionally aligned with women, the armor appearing at the end of the diagonal originating in Venus, Cephalus’s gear having been placed directly under Aurora’s body.

This eroticized rendition of things brings to mind Werner Sombart’s dictum, contained in his book on Luxus and Capitalism, that “if luxury is to become personal, materialistic luxury, it must be predicated on an awakened sensuousness.”194 Linking consumption to sensual pleasure, this statement summarizes the main argument of Sombart’s early twentieth-century theory of capitalist development in which he proposed that human psychology played a significant, if not more important role as the economic factor. For Sombart, luxury—the demand for it, its production, and its effects—was at the origins of capitalism, rather than the other way around, the pursuit of sensory pleasure through the experience of material objects was a major motive for economic development. Although flawed in many ways, Sombart’s analysis remains intriguing because of his insistence on the psychological and erotic determination of economic process.195 Sombart’s discussion of luxury helps us to recognize that Boucher formulates in these paintings an aesthetic of seduction of a particular kind. What he paints is neither the love of the gods nor human sexuality, nor even the love of things, but the sensual appeal of luxury. The brilliance of execution displayed in these canvases reinforces their effect. Their saturated colors and bold handling, which Boucher’s contemporaries recognized as uncommon at the time, were clearly meant to advertise the young and yet relatively unknown painter’s chromatic and technical brio aimed also at turning the paintings themselves into enticing objects. This is what the extraordinary sensuous treatment of their surface was all about. It transformed the pendants into material objects rather than merely visual forms of seduction. Not only the viewer’s sight but also the viewer’s touch was being courted, a desire to possess, not only to look, thus stimulated. At stake in this sensuous solicitation was not only a new visual idiom but also a suggestion of the new status of painting as an element of interior decor. Transforming the pendants into appealing objects, Boucher diminished the distance separating his paintings from other luxury commodities that furnished Derbais’s fashionably appointed home. Indeed, as his inventory attests, a substantial number of overmantel mirrors that La Font de Saint-Yenne would soon denounce as the single most pernicious element of contemporary interior decor, at once a threat to ambitious painting and a metaphor of its deplorable fate in commercialized society.196 Mannlich’s later reference to Boucher’s paintings as “furniture” (tische comme meubles) also comes to mind here.197 To phrase it differently, Boucher’s approach signaled not only a change in the signifying economy of the painted image—what Norman Bryson has aptly called the eroticization of the plane of signifiers—but also its entry into the domain of economy tout court.198

The space of the erotic encounter between gods announced itself to be a site of the viewer’s encounter with a seductive material thing—a commodity. The role of the female figure was to make this seduction explicit; she was a cipher of the desire that underlies the consummation immersed in the sphere of inanimate things that these paintings render so animately, such as the “inhabited” armor at Vulcan’s feet. Through the female figure, in other words, Boucher disclosed—and exploited—the erotic nature of human attraction to material possessions. And thus he also engaged with the subjective register of consumption. Subjectivity is at issue in Derbais’s pendants on two interrelated levels. One has to do with these paintings’ mode of address, another with the pattern of human interaction in them that may be seen to represent a certain model of livelihood. In their thematic emphasis on eros and their exceptionally sensuous handling of paint, the pendants addressed themselves explicitly to an individual subject understood as a function of the senses and linked, above all, to sensuous pleasure. Unlike Poussin, who, a century earlier, used the canvas as a window to the world, Boucher represents the moral dilemma of desire—his Aurora is shown filled with love and desperate to retain Cephalus, who remains, nonetheless, determined in his refusal (fig. 1—49)—Boucher is not concerned with the moral drama of wanting but with the want itself understood as the experience of the senses bound to a surface. No deep affect or tension is shown. Boucher’s figures, as one commentator put it, bear “peu d’expression.”194 It is the lustful experience of the senses of the painted image that interests this painter. The “showiness” of execution—vigorous handling, animated brushstrokes, a “melthouss” touch (pinceau méllichous), and vivid, even garish colors—drove this point home.

Ancient myth was, moreover, represented by Boucher as a terrain of private fantasy based on the experiences of the senses. The subjects, though based...
on specific literary sources, did not require erudition to be grasped and appreciated. Boucher offered idiosyncratic interpretations that emphasized and encouraged a play of imagination linked to the interaction between the main figures in each pendant. The erotic encounter has been read as a carrier of a certain kind of self-image. What was at stake in these mythological fantasies was not only a new decorative idiom but also a model of subjectivity associated with the emergent culture of appearances: a self caught up with a mirage of itself, a subject as an effect of a sensuous surface.

To understand better this vision of subjectivity we must turn briefly to the work of Boucher's contemporary, Pierre Carlet de Marivaux. For in Marivaux’s novels and Boucher’s paintings is, accordingly, a conception of the self that corresponds to this imaginary perception. Both recognize the self as, essentially, a fiction that the spread of commodities helped produce and sustain. Such a view is predicated on the recognition of commodities as instruments mediating the subject’s relation to the world rather than separating it from or itself, commodities, that is, as forms of representation that help develop an image of itself, contributing to the emergence of its imaginary function.

In this way, Boucher’s pendants are personal mythologies: they represent a certain myth of the self in the early stages of commercial modernity, a subject imagined outside the confines of Christian ethics, driven by self-interest and pleasure—like Marivaux’s Jacob who, in his own words, wrote his memoirs “not only to instruct others but to amuse myself”—a subject given to illusions, and capable of deceit, in a word, the kind of self-humbled by the proponents of commercial modernity, beginning with Bernard Mandeville and the French propagators of his ideas, notably Voltaire, whose purpose was to denounce as aligned with seeming rather than being.

Boucher appropriates mythology for the construction of a certain modern mirror: a pictorial illusion of the world of desirable things and of the self inhabiting this world, a subject looking into his own reflection.

The paintings also provide a mythic vision of the individual who inhabited the new Parisian hotels, including the inhabitant of the Hôtel Derbais, Derbais himself, as a kind of self-styled Jacob. This is to say that they represent the notion of fantasy that shaped both the new architectural interior for which these spectacular canvases were painted, but also resonate with the forms through which the design of such spaces was disseminated at the time. This was the notion of fantasy that was prominent at the time in the commercial domain, for instance, in the works of artists such as Pierre-Quentin Chéde’s Livre des Fantaisies, Cartouches, Ornements, published in 1738.

This model of subjectivity has much to do with how the economic sphere and the market itself were perceived at the time, this perception being, as historians of the period have pointed out, itself a kind of fantasy, or a mirage. The consumer-directed economy was in this period France still in its early stages of development, and this development was, moreover, markedly uneven. The economy was not entirely driven by the consumer demand, but it was imagined to be so. Emerging from Marivaux’s novels and Boucher’s paintings is, accordingly, a conception of the self that corresponds to this imaginary perception. Both recognize the self as, essentially, a fiction that the spread of commodities helped produce and sustain. Such a view is predicated on the recognition of commodities as instruments mediating the subject’s relation to the world rather than separating it from or itself, commodities, that is, as forms of representation that help develop an image of itself, contributing to the emergence of its imaginary function.

The attentions of this stylish female apparition are crucial for the hero’s sense of self-worth, her love key for the development of his self-love. The heroine’s relevant to a “soft rank,” in a sense, a mirage of Jacob himself. It is important to note that the duality implied by his vision—the woman not as she is but as she appears to him from his own lowly position—is reflected by the internal doubling evoked by Jacob when he speaks of “my pride and me” (Pride— who, with her attributes downplayed, make their appearance in the original—must be understood in a positive sense, close to personal dignity, or pride in oneself). The emergence of the hero’s inner sense of self-worth, his newly complex subjectivity, is shown to depend on the charming spectacle of benevolent femininity.

In the novel, a connection between Jacob’s vision of a woman and Boucher’s female apparition, which is to say that the latter, like the former, function not only as depictions of a specific person, or, in Boucher’s case, destitutes, but as an internal fantasy on which the male self envisioned in these paintings depends. Shown “hanging” on their seductresses’ alluring gaze, Vulcan and Cephalus may be understood as visual equivalents of Marivaux’s Jacob in that they represent subjects taken in by the spectacle of the female body that is also a version of themselves. The emphatic reciprocity between the figures could be seen to represent the very structure of subjectivity evoked by Marivaux: a model of the self based on being both spectator and spectacle for someone else’s gaze.

The Boucher/Marivaux analogy is important for our appreciation of the role of women in the Derbais paintings. It becomes clear that though the woman is staged as the privileged, erotically charged object of the look, for both the male figures within the painting and the viewer—she is also defined as a subject, not only of her own desiring gaze anchored in the male figures but also by being the central element of a certain vision of subjectivity. In other words, Boucher’s woman embodies the attraction of commodity—something like an impressive equipage or a beautiful dress that produces, in Marivaux’s words, a certain style of appearance—and also the mirage of the self under its spell. What Marivaux’s writing helps us discern in Boucher’s paintings is the image of the self split within itself, a vision of a compound identity of which the two aspects are represented by the male and the female figures.
books, fantastic forms of frames, cartouches, fountains, and whole gardens of imaginary delights proliferated. Their function was to offer ideas for interior design, but they also embraced personal fantasy in another sense, as publications aiming at individual clients, circulating in relatively affordable print editions that could be bought by professionals seeking ideas for interior decor and also by the larger, amateur audience, as tools for home entertainment and definition of identity.202

Boucher himself was, as we have seen, an active contributor to this new decorative imaginary. The canvases executed for Derbais marked his effort to reinvent painting as the key component of this domain of fantasy that was both commercially grounded and operating on a personal register of the consumer’s pleasure. With this gesture, placing painting squarely in the service of the inhabitants of the new hotels, Boucher reached for a broader constituency than the traditional aristocratic clientele of decorative painting. He sided, to put it crudely, with those who could pay for the fantasies to be fleshed out in their houses conceived as the representations of themselves. And what he offered these consumers was neither mere decoration nor a mere mirror reflection, but the visual means of imagining themselves, the stuff from which these individuals could construct their own myths. Boucher’s painting presented this new audience with the image of the effect of the new world of objects on the conception of individual identity.

At the same time, these two paintings may also be seen to represent Boucher. With Derbais’s commission, Boucher made a bid for an artistic identity, and the fact that these were his first signed and dated works confirms their importance as self-representation. This self-definition—a bold declaration of his artistic self-worth—hunged, like Jacob’s ladder, on the spectacle of the woman. But if the woman is a figure of Boucher, it is in a specific sense, as a stand-in for his work, his sign, aligned with, and equivalent to, his signature. It is not that Boucher identifies with femininity. Rather, what we witness in his works is a sort of div identification, the assumption of an image—specifically, the image of the female body under which Boucher places his signature in each pendant—as the product of his hand that stands for him but also, in a sense, obscures him.203 His highly stylized image of the woman’s body—its generic quality, its alignment with the painting’s surface—functions not unlike the artist’s signature, that is, as the stylized index of his body: both say “it is me” only insofar as I am not in it, as a consistent and reproducible sign that stands for me in my absence. In this sense, the female figure is a mirage of the artist. Boucher’s entire practice is marked by a kind of subjective evacuation that has to do with his development of a consistent “signature” style based on a generic vision of femininity. First inaugurated in Derbais’s paintings, this “feminine” vision, and Boucher’s stylistic consistency of which it became a mark—enough to think of the parade of Venuses in his art—was inseparable from the artist’s own consistent but abstracted sense of identity.204 As one modern commentator has observed, referring to women in Boucher’s painting in general: “there is no one there.”205 It is this eclipse of the artist as a subject of his painting that the motif of the putto in the Aurora and Cephalus hovering, almost entirely obliterated by the cloud, directly above the artist’s signature suggestively conveys—the image of the artist as a producer of illusions that both reproduce and obliterate him (fig. 1.42).206

The Derbais pendants were Boucher’s signature pieces in more than one way. Together with the rest of the group, they initiated his career as a painter. They secured recognition for his uncommon pictorial skills. But, as I have been arguing, they also performed a specific cultural function: they launched Boucher as the visual mythologist of the consuming self, a new kind of personality emerging in France in the early eighteenth century, linked to the flow of commodities and to the new lifestyle enabled and defined by them. The paintings inaugurated Boucher’s investment in the female body as the key element of this new, personal form of mythology, and as the signature aspect of his practice. Not only did the female body assume the central position as the privileged locus of aesthetic invention, it also came to represent his practice as nothing else did, epitomizing the status of his work as an accommodating object for the new subject.

The effect of the pendants on Boucher’s work is epitomized by the extended life of one particular figure in Venus and Vulcan, the nymph reclining on a cloud with her behind exposed, in his productions (fig. 1.45). Evidently the painter recognized he had hit on a vein of gold with the young woman’s pose: he repeated it in numerous paintings and drawings, from the Leda and the Swan (fig. 1.42), to the Dark-Haired Odalisque (fig. 1.45), to the Munich Girl on the Sofa, also known as the Blonde Odalisque (fig. 1.46).207 Among his female creations, this one was most like his signature, something recognizably his own. By the mid-1750s, “Boucher” as a market product was identified with the female body featured in these paintings. A pastel study of a woman’s foot, now at the Musée Carnavalet, epitomizes the at once commercial and psychic economy of the transformation of a woman into a sign for the artist (fig. 1.47). Rather than a preparatory drawing, this is most likely a reprieve of the motif from the Munich painting, Girl on the Sofa, made for commercial purposes. It has been suggested that Boucher followed the demand of the connaisseurs eager to possess a bit of his oeuvre, a fragment of something the artist had already done.208 As such, Study of a Foot is an example of the artist’s willing self-commodification. What the corporeal fragmentation in this work also makes patently evident is the artist’s willing self-fetishization. This breaking apart—not only of a woman’s body but also of the artist’s own work—epitomizes the sexual logic behind the transformation of his art into a luxury commodity.
46

THE PROMISCUOUS SELF

I was so moved by the pleasure of imagining what [my appearance] would bring about that I was almost breathless.

—Marivaux, La Vie de Marianne

The immersion of Boucher’s painting in the burgeoning culture of consumption, so successfully inaugurated by his decorative series for Derbais’s hôtel, came also to inform his brief but significant foray into genre painting in the early 1740s. Boucher launched himself into the production of highly finished smaller-scale paintings that provide compelling testimony to the rising importance of consumer goods within the social realm and within Boucher’s own aesthetic project. Although some of them were commissioned by specific individuals, taken as a group, these works, which included Le Déjeuner, or The Breakfast (fig. 1.45), La Toilette, or A Lady Fixing Her Garter (see fig. 1.56), A Lady on a Day Bed (see fig. 1.45), and La Marchande de modes, or The Milliner (see fig. 1.57), nonetheless signaled the broader ambition, at once aesthetic and commercial, motivating Boucher’s practice at that time. In taking them on, the painter not only responded to the demands of the specific patrons but, more speculatively, also sought to position himself in an art market that was dominated by Dutch and Flemish cabinet miniatures. He may have wanted to prove his skills in executing the kind of small-scale images, known then as the “sujets galants et agréables,” that were a specialty of his older colleague Jean-François de Troy and that were much in demand at the time, their marketability enhanced by the promise of an extended life through the medium of reproductive prints. Yet it is also evident that the aesthetic import of these canvases cannot be fully accounted for by Boucher’s mimicry of Dutch genre or his commercial rivalry with another French painter.

The significance of these images resides, in my view, in how they depict contemporary practices of consumption and reveal the growing importance of commodity in everyday life and in the cultural imagination, especially in imagining the self. It is not only that Boucher displays in these paintings a whole array of luxury goods: from sumptuous decorative objects, such as a wall clock, or a porcelain vase mounted in gilt bronze, to inexpensive trinkets, such as a Chinese figurine, or a fan. It is that he makes evident the transformation of these diverse luxurious goods into personal possessions, objects of individual relevance, comfort, and pleasure. It is the very birth of commodity in the most basic early sense of the word as, literally, an accommodating object, that we witness in these depictions of daily life. They demonstrate how all kinds of meaningless or unnecessary things—luxurious, in the sense of superfluous, goods—acquire meaningful existence as vehicles of convenience, personal pleasure, and sensory gratification.

Depicting different aspects of daily life—mostly, but not only, that of the elites—these works suggest that the proliferation of goods changed patterns of social behavior but also helped shape an emergent sense of individual identity. Briefly put, they envision how commodities were interiorized, that is, how they were being incorporated into the physical space of an architectural interior, altering its contours and function as an arena of private life, but also how they began to recast the subjective ideal of interiority understood as inner space.

In all of the works in question Boucher engages the format of so-called tableau de modes, mastered by Jean-François de Troy in the 1720s and ’30s, a type of painting that records the daily rituals of fashionable society, predominantly of women. Boucher’s exercises in this subgenre, however, are marked by a subtle shift in emphasis from the idea of fashionable sociability toward a greater prominence of the fashionable thing at the core of human interaction. It is, in other words, not only the relations between people but also the effects of the depicted subjects’ engagement with the objects, and its consequences, that we are given to appreciate in these canvases.

There were both economic and discursive factors behind the rising concern with the effect of things on people, epitomized by the debate on luxury, when Boucher was painting his cabinet pictures, in themselves a type of luxury object. The very meaning of luxury was destabilized by the unprecedented spread of commodities. When in his Lettre sur le Luxe published anonymously in 1745, the writer and savant André François Deslandes remarked that luxury amounted to no more than “some bagatelles transformed into things of importance,” his assertion signaled a degree of uncertainty about the meaning of the term he was trying to define. Diderot summed up this sense of semantic ambiguity when he wrote

Staging both a slice of his vision and his conspicuous faire (the showy rendition of the woman’s foot with its pink toes, of the bluish white pillow on which it rests, and of the swath of golden yellow fabric framing it), this image is perhaps the most succinct statement about how Boucher came to understand his practice in the wake of Derbais’s commission.

1. 46. François Boucher, Girl on the Sofa, also known as the Blonde Odalisque, 1746. Oil on canvas. Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

in the Encyclopédie: "We say, without any of us being mistaken, of an infinity of objects of all sorts, that they are luxuries, but what is this luxury that we attribute so infallibly to so many objects?" The vexing question of meaning emerged with particular force in considerations regarding the social and individual effects of luxury consumption.

Although luxury was an established topic of discussion and critique in France since at least the seventeenth century, notably by classical republicans and Christian moralists, the luxury debate was rekindled in the early eighteenth century by the advent of what Thorstein Veblen later termed the culture of "conspicuous consumption." Another factor contributing to the renewed concern with luxury was the engagement of French intellectuals, among them Voltaire, with the ideas of Bernard Mandeville, the provocative British defender of luxury. Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, first published in England in 1714 and appearing in multiple revised editions throughout the century (notably in 1723 and 1738), was debated on both sides of the Channel even before it was translated into French in 1740. Mandeville recognized that commerce brought about dramatic shifts in human behavior and self-conception in two key respects: increased dependence on things and reliance on the opinion of others. But these behavioral symptoms were determined not by external circumstances but by the inherent qualities of human personality. Self-interest was, in Mandeville's view, the prime motive of human action, and he considered the concomitant notions of desire and pleasure as the motors not only of individual functioning but also of economic and social development. Recognizing private vice as a source of common good, Mandeville understood the modern economy to be founded upon the satisfaction of desire, a correlation he found most promising insofar as "the wants of Man are innumerable."

In the mid-1730s, Voltaire and the economic theorist Jean-François Meuson popularized the British thinker's ideas in France. In his *Man of the World*, published in 1736, and *The Defense of the Man of the World*, which followed in 1737, Voltaire proposed what may be termed a Mandevillian revision of honnêteté, that is, a recasting of the elite ideal of politeness and polish in commercialized terms, as grounded in material possessions. Thus Voltaire's worldly man unabashedly declares:

Voilà bholyly epicanfmance conception of the self corresponded to Mandeville's recognition of self-interest and desire as primary stimulants of human actions, as did his pleasure-driven subject's manifest lack of concern for the moral implications of his inclinations. If the honnête homme of Méré and other eighteenth-century social theorists of polite- ness based their distinction on the moral esteem of others, Voltaire's mondain relies on his material possessions as the source of both pleasure and self-image—in the eyes of others and his own. The "man of the world" vaunts his predilection for luxury in all its material manifestations, from coffee, wine, and spices to art, precious objects, and elegantly decorated dwellings. He is, in other words, essentially a consumer. Yet as Voltaire provocatively insists, it is precisely as such that this exemplary individual is a benefit for society; his appetite for luxury is not only a stimulant of commerce, economic growth, and national prosperity but also a contribution to cultural and artistic development—Voltaire places special emphasis on the benefits of consumption for the development of the arts—and, more generally, to civilizational progress. Ultimately, like superfluity itself—for Voltaire "a very necessary thing"—the worldly man is presented as socially and culturally indispensable to modern society. The new subjective ideal sketched out in *Le Mondain* proved, however, to be highly controversial; the response revived the older moralist tradition, represented by Montaigne and La Rochefoucauld, that was critical of individuals driven by *amour-propre* and excessive love of refinement and pleasure. The most influential critical view of luxury consumption was offered at midcentury by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Formulated in his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750) and developed most forcefully and influentially in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality among Men* (1755), Rousseau's critique raised the issue of the profound subjective losses entailed by commercial modernity in general, and by the spread of consumption of superfluous goods in particular. In Rousseau's view, consumption of unnecessary goods turned man into a socialized, artificial individual, a self-defined by vanity and self-love, and by the rituals of display and performance that
transformed all intersubjective relations, such as friendship, and the self itself, into mere appearances. 53 A person was reduced to an actor, a manipulator of masks: “it was necessary to appear to be other than what one in fact was. To be and to seem to become two altogether different things and from this distinction came conspicuous ostentation, deceptive cunning and all the vices that follow from them.”54 Rousseau contrasted the self-reliant “savage” who “lives within himself” with the modern sociable individual who is “always outside of himself, knows how to live only in the opinion of others” from whose judgment alone he draws the sentiment of his own existence.232 The gist of Rousseau’s insight was that possessions are not only morally exhausting—a condition recognized and cynically embraced by Mandeville—but that they may eventually be dispossessing, causing a kind of subjective evacuation.53 Painted before Rousseau’s strongly worded condemnation of luxury took hold of the public imagination, Boucher’s images appear as visual endorsements of, if not apologies for, luxury consumption. Upon closer scrutiny, however, these images of life with luxury reveal more complex questions lurking behind the notion of consumption. As they document the ascendance of the thing in social life and in the cultural imaginary, they also speak, indirectly, about how the circulation of commercial goods altered the nature of human relations and the relation of human beings to themselves.

Le Déjeuner, painted in 1739, is the earliest example of Boucher’s engagement with the theme of life under the spell of the commodity. A small gathering of people—two women, two children, and a servant—is shown nestled in a corner of a room, taking their small repast.56 They are most likely drinking coffee, which became a highly fashionable beverage throughout the eighteenth century. Among Parisians in the 1730s and 1740s, its pleasures were vaunted by, among others, Voltaire who, in his Defense of the Worldly Man, linked its popularity to the international expansion of trade and, more ambi-

blety, by Johann Sebastian Bach who wrote a Coffee Cantata dedicated to the addiction to it in 1734.238 It was often fed to children, as other images from the period—including Jean-Etienne Liotard’s portrait of his sister and niece at breakfast (1754)—indicate.227 Most notable in Boucher’s painting is the way in which this basic act of consumption is shown to pro-
duce a sense of intimacy, establishing the connection between the members of the group and defining their relation to the interior. The women and children have taken over this part of the room and made it their own: a portable lacquer table, one of those exotic furnishing items rendered fashionable by the boutiques of the Marchands merciers, was pulled up by the fireplace for the occasion, and they gathered around it to perform their improvised ritual. They appear entirely natural, their intimacy unforced, yet this effect of naturalness has been carefully, if imper-
cceptibly, orchestrated. Note, for example, how the demand for the desirable drink travels diagonally across the canvas, establishing the link between the figures: from the little girl leaning against her chair and looking up, to the woman in the scarlet tipet who turns her head toward the girl as if in response to her request, to the butler, leaning forward, ready to serve. Another concatenation is created by the internal echoes between the servant’s hand reaching for the cafetière, the hand of the woman feeding the child on her lap, and again, in the reversed gesture of the woman in the red cape bringing a spoon to her mouth. These visual rhymes produce a sense of inner circulation and exchange, the bond of consumption that ties the group together. The coffee pot held by the butler has been placed, as if strategically, at the very center of the painting, equidistant from its four sides, confirming its latent importance. Its bottom-

heavy, bulbous shape, typical of cafetières, is engaged in a subtle formal dialogue with the swifit of the rococo sconce above it and, through the white cloth spilling over the top of the mantelpiece, with the porcelain sugar pot and the cup below, creating a sense of morphological consistency of the image. A fash-

ionable commodity—coffee—is established as an invisible yet key aspect of this painting, the act of its consumption securing the internal coherence of the depicted scene.

This is quite different from what de Troy represented some eight years earlier in his Reading at the Salon (fig. 1.49).248 Here, too, we witness an intimate gathering of people in a fashionably decorated inte-

rior, with some of its elements quite similar to those that appear in Boucher’s canvas, such as the large overmantle mirror flanked by rococo sconces and even the silver teapot much like Boucher’s cafetière, standing, alone, on the mantelpiece. This solitary item, however, remains unused. De Troy’s group is absorbed in a lecture, an act of leisure rather than consumption. A book, not a beverage, is at the center of the picture. This mode of passing time is more-

over, most sumptuously staged, defining this activity as a socially specific enactment of class. Attired with elegance and at conspicuous expense, de Troy’s indi-

viduals succumb to a momentary distraction but also show themselves ever ready for another one. A woman in a teal velvet robe turns away from the group to cast a half-inviting, half-querying glance at us, as if asking “Who are you? Do you belong with us?”237 The gist of de Troy’s project is to convey the idea of leisure as the sublime privilege of aristocracy, the very mark of social distinction. In Boucher’s paint-

ing, on the other hand, the emphasis has shifted from social privilege to personal pleasure. To begin with, his is not an image of elite sociability as much as a representation of elite private life. Luxury is not a token of social entitlement as much as a source of personal well-being and bodily comfort. Although the figures in the Déjeuner are elegantly dressed, it is not opulence but informality and convenience that their attire, a version of mourning wear, or the aloha-

bâti, conveys. Moreover, material things perform a different function than in de Troy’s canvas. Every person in Boucher’s painting is shown holding an object that in some way is involved in the act of pro-
viding pleasure, for oneself, or for others—a spoon, a cup, a coffee pot. The commodity, Boucher’s image says, is a kind of thing that is literally—bodily, personally—accommodating.

The act of consumption produces a new kind of connectedness between people, an intimacy that cuts across generations, linking adults to children, and also traverses the social boundary between masters and servants. The servant—whose presence is the more conspicuous in comparison to de Troy’s exclusively upper-class assembly—is shown to be an integral part of this gathering. The ease with which Boucher’s individuals occupy their space, their embeddedness in it, is also remarkable. The sense of comfort extends from furniture to the surroundings that Boucher’s protagonists made visibly their own. Their elegantly appointed room is “personalized” by a plethora of knickknacks inserted within its deco-

rative scheme. How exactly an elite interior should be decorated was being codified at the very time Boucher employed his brushes in representa-
tion of the new ideals of domesticity. New models of interior design were being disseminated in print, contributing to the commercialization and relative democratization of the new decorative taste (the go
t style moderne). The key propagator of architectural design and the author of a new typology of elite interior spaces, Jean-François Blondel, who pub-

lished his first book, De la Distribution Des Maisons de Plaisance just two years before Boucher painted
his Breton, would have certainly approved of Boucher’s interior. Yet Boucher’s representation of elite space includes what the architectural design books did not, the traces of personal use that act like a handwritten gloss on the main “text” of this inte-
rior. What else are the two small daguerreotypes suspended on each side of the overmantle mirror for than to display, in addition to books, a silver pot, a small, probably clay magot, and other assorted trinkets, which, together with the lacquered table and the étagères themselves, are the telltale signs that the inhabitants of this room have done their shopping at the marchands merciers?240 There are, to be sure, also more obviously luxurious objects, such as the porcelain pot-pourri mounted in bronze that stands atop a rococo console, or the large, elaborately deco-
rated clock hanging on the wall, both clearly indi-
cating the inhabitants’ wealth and taste. But it is above all the display of the inexpensive and super-
fuous — that Boucher’s painting brings to the fore.

The Breakfast speaks of a historical phenomenon that Boucher’s painting brings to the fore. The focus on consumption, rather than leisure per se, as the defining aspect of elite life, and, as a conseque-
ence of it, a new intimacy of that is not class based but derives from access to commodities and to the pleasures they provide, are the two key, novel aspects in Boucher’s painting.

The Breakfast speaks of a historical phenomenon existing on a wider scale. Studied by historians, eighteenth-century Parisian household inventories from the 1730s and 1740s on revealed an over-
whelming presence of all kinds of personal possess-
ions, not only in elite dwellings but in less affluent ones as well.44 Evidently Luxury, in its different forms, was being discovered by the Parisian popu-
lation at large, and this discovery produced a sig-
nificant change in the mode of living across different social strata, contributing to the invention of privacy in the spatial and, more broadly, cultural sense of the word. The interior came to be under-
stood and lived as an intimate space defined by the presence of an array of personal items in it, the objects of taste, vehicles of sensory gratification.444 The fine tea set, depicted in one of Jean-Étienne Liotard’s late still lifes, attests to the newly widespread, personal engagement with one of the era’s quin-
tessential, increasingly available commodities, Chinese porcelain (fig. 1.50).445 Someone has just enjoyed a treatine snack and left the accessories of this light repast on a tray: the empty teacup overturned by a spoon, the leftover tea visible in another, sugar lumps ready to be served with the silver tongs poised on the rim of the bowl, and the remnants of bread on the plate, speak eloquently of pleasures taken. These manifest traces of use are not symbols of rusticity, as, in the Dutch seventeenth-century precedents for such depictions, but signifiers of commoditas, indexes of consumer’s enjoyment.

Le Dîner also registers this new appreciation of small possessions — the porcelain coffee service standing on the red lacquered table among them. Clearly, they are featured not as proofs of affluence but as personal accessories of daily gratifications. Even the children in Boucher’s painting are shown to cherish their objects. The woman in her scarlet cape gently holds her coffee cup in one hand while slowly raising the spoon to her mouth with the other, the warm steam rising from the cup registering not only the temperature of her drink but also her connection to the object that contains it. The point is that it is not only pleasure but also a sense of subjective liaison — sympathy — with an object that we are given to see. Making evident the attachment of the depicted figures to their small possessions, underscoring the care and grace with which they handle their objects, and materializing the privileged link between the body and the thing, the painter shows how small luxury possessions, such as a coffee cup, were, in a sense, interiorized. We may say that the woman is shown not only sipping her coffee but also “ingesting” the effect of commod-
ity, that is, acquiring the habit of accommodation provided by consumable goods.

Boucher, let us note, is not the only painter who represents this kind of intimacy with things at the time. We find similar depictions of consumption as a personal ritual in Chardin’s Lady Taking Her Tea, painted in 1737 through exhibiting at the Salon four years later, or in Liotard’s slightly later pastel of The Servant with Hot Chocolate. Like Dijonner, these images testify to the new kind of attention brought to the small luxuries of daily life and to consumption as an act of focused attention, a source of intense per-
sonal satisfaction, chiefly women’s. Chardin’s lady—
ly a portrait of the painter’s first wife, Marguerite Saintard — is shown in an act of quasi-communion with her cup of tea (fig. 1.51).448 The steam rising up from it fills the room with a palpable aromatic promise of the reward in which the woman seems enveloped, oblivious to the surrounding world. The painting extols the small but absorbing pleasures of everyday life — a cup of tea is all that is needed — and the new sense of intimacy with its instruments. The particular interest of Chardin’s painting for this dis-
cussion lies, though, in the way the painter anchors this idea of sensory reward in a specific object, the porcelain cup, probably an import, as one of those cherished personal belongings that could be found in the homes of the bourgeoisie from this period — such as that of Marguerite Saintard’s herself.449 In other words, it is not only the new philosophy of the per-
ceiving body discussed by Michael Baxandall in his

Le Déjeuner — that Boucher’s figures to their objects can be described in similar terms. Like the children with their toys, the adults in his paint-
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houses.253 Liotard is the visual ethnographer of this new private habit, registering in the smallest of details all of its accessories: the porcelain cup with thick dark-brown crust of hot chocolate rising to the brim, a transparent container within which the cup is held for protection from the heat generated by its content, and the glass of water for quenching thirst after consumption of this rich concoction. Combined with the maid’s haughty immobility and her intense concentration on her task, the careful rendition of these objects conveys how important such daily pleasures have become and how important became also the instruments—and purveyors—of these pleasures.

Despite their differences, both paintings represent an altogether new kind of relation to the object made possible by the new conditions of circulation and exchange of consumer goods. Relaying the sense of importance of simply feeling content, of the fleeting quotidian bonheur anchored in new kinds of small, superfluous yet significant goods, these depictions indicate the effect of consumption on bodily but also subjective existence.

The Breakfast makes evident how the new mode of experiencing objects—their status as commodities—bears upon the structures of both individual and collective life. Here we witness not a solitary communion with commodity but the immersion of the entire household in the practice of consumption. The interior is not, as it was in the paintings by Chardin and Liotard, a barren theater of the subject’s intimate encounter with its objects, but a richly appointed space within which different members of the household coexist. Boucher’s inclusion of the servant in his tableau of consumption is particularly telling.250 The only man in this scene of familial intimacy, the butler appears as a substitute for the paternal figures in the seventeenth-century Northern representations of family life. Boucher clearly drew upon one example, which the artist may have known at least through an engraving, is Flemish painter Isaac Coeddyck’s Weaver’s Shop. The figure of a woman feeding a baby on her lap is posed as an almost eucharistic connection to the object in Koedyck’s image, painted emphasizes this.251 He is not simply someone who serves what others need but the go-between, a figure straddling both the world of people and the world of things. On the one hand, he appears to be inseparable from the scene. His leaning pose, his physical proximity to the group, his hand grasping the handle of the cafetière, which is echoed in the inseparable from the scene. His leaning pose, his physical proximity to the group, his hand grasping the handle of the cafetière, which is echoed in the

In his La Chocolatière, Liotard, too, creates an impression of an almost eucharistic connection to the object of consumption (fig. 1.52). Although he stages the hot-chocolate-bearing servant like a quasi-saint, she is clearly an agent of corporeal rather than spiritual satisfactions. Posed against a white background, with floor boards as the only indication of the room, this figure appears as austere and monumental as the Evangelists from the wings of the Northern Renaissance altarpieces.252 Her hieratic pose bestows gravity upon her mundane task of serving a refreshment. Let us recall that hot chocolate was, like coffee, a newly fashionable beverage at the time, both in public establishments, such as coffee houses, wherein both beverages could be consumed, and in private houses.254 Liotard is the visual ethnographer of this new private habit, registering in the smallest of details all of its accessories: the porcelain cup with thick dark-brown crust of hot chocolate rising to the brim, a transparent container within which the cup is held for protection from the heat generated by its content, and the glass of water for quenching thirst after consumption of this rich concoction. Combined with the maid’s haughty immobility and her intense concentration on her task, the careful rendition of these objects conveys how important such daily pleasures have become and how important became also the instruments—and purveyors—of these pleasures.

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through means other than facial expression or body language. It imparts that there is a relation between the newly accommodating interior and the emergence of the new cultural ideal of interiority, that the personalization of space results in the emergent sense of the person as space.

The way in which the tropes of exteriority subtly reinscribes this view of the interior may be taken as one such indirect commentary on selfhood as a space formed by the habits of consumption. For, self-absorbed and self-contained as it is to see at first, this enclave of privacy opens itself up toward us, letting us in, as if inadvertently, to what is going on. The butler leans forward, the woman in the red mantle turns around to attend to her child’s demand, and we feel admitted into their closed circle, privy to their conversation, envisioning its self-abstracting alignment with the outside world.

This is not, however, a matter of “absorption” understood by Michael Fried as a trope manifesting the concern with pictorial autonomy in eighteenth-century painting. What is going on here has to do with how one constructs a compelling visual commodity with reification, consumption with alienation, the subject could begin, so to speak, to see herself as a space different from her outward existence. What we have is not the traditional motif of the mirror as the device of vanity or narcissistic self-confirmation. It is not a surface of self-reflection, one in which one may recognize oneself (the mirror reflects no one), nor a reassuring echo of the full riches of this dwelling space. Rather, it is a kind of abstracted illusion—a sign of space—aligned, moreover, with another form of illusion, the painting above it. A figure of an interiorized exteriority, the mirror hints at what the immersion in the field of objects that define the realm of the visible in the era of consumption does to the inner life of the subject. It reveals a kind of outwardness emerging within the self. This is not to say that the painting suggests a reduction of the once deep and fully fleshed self to a mere appearance. It would be tempting to construct such an argument, following the now familiar association, first suggested by Rousseau, of commodity with reification, consumption with alienation. Rather, the opposite may be argued: that the emphasis on exterior creates a sense of interior. The barren, abstract space reflected in the mirror stands for a key aspect of the subject of consumption, envisioning its self-abstracting alignment with visual representation that is at once constraining and enabling. It represents the self that exists for others, for show—a self that Rousseau was to denounce later as aligned with “seeming” rather than “being”—but also one that becomes visible and intelligible to others and to oneself.

It is thus that this entirely convincing representation of the douceur de la vie within the fashionably appointed interior, an image of the safely, sweetly interiorized life, subverts the ambivalent effect of this life linked to the concomitant subjective exteriorization. As if unbeknownst to itself, the painting intimates that the investment in personal possessions, the subjective liaison with the objects, results in the transformation of one’s own self into a quasi-decorative object of the world’s gaze. The figure of the butler epitomizes this; he is both a three-dimensional person and a decorative item, not unlike the exotic trinkets on the étagère. All the figures in this painting are, in fact, shown to be animated in a way that closely resembles the internal animation of the interior décor. Their bodies are shown leaning, turning, or twisting gently, like the sconces, the frame of the clock, the legs of the console, the trimmings on the wall, with the flow of their clothes underscoring this analogy, as does the imperceptible, unindividual quality of their faces. They seem to be all tropes. Yet at the same time, the painting points out that such emphasis on the exterior produces an emergent sense of interiority, a spatial recognition of oneself as a being distinguished from others, as seen in the mirror “installed” to the woman in the red tippet, a realm that, though invisible to her, is her own.

Despite its small format and its status as “mere” genre, Boucher’s Breakfast takes on some of the major questions haunting the emergent “culture of appearances” consumption’s subjective effects. Do commodities allow for individuation or, on the contrary, standardization of the self? Is the reliance on objects a basis of subjective autonomy or retifying dependence? Although Boucher cannot be seen to deliver a firm judgment on these matters—this is not, after all, his role—his paintings does make some important suggestions. If it registers the transformation of the self into surface in the nascent culture of consumption, it also sketches out an emergent self-consciousness about oneself as a divided entity. This is a subjectivity marked by the split between the (signifying) exterior and the (signified) interior, that is, by the structure of the sign that enables the self to represent itself—to others and to itself—but also one that installs the element of the invisible, the unknowable (the unconscious) within the self. It is in this sense that Boucher may be said to paint a recognition of life in the new interior as generative of inner life. — — —

That consumption transforms both the physical interior and the cultural notions of interiority is also evident in two cabinet pictures that Boucher produced for his Swedish patrons, La Toilette et La Marchande de modes. Both paintings focus on a specific aspect of consumption, namely, fashion. Painted in 1744 for Count Carl Gustaf Tessin, a Swedish envoy to Paris, La Toilette, also known as the Lady Fastening a Garter, depicts a young woman who is dressing, assisted by her servant (fig. 1.56). The woman’s social rank is uncertain: she is about to don a laced cap called a commode that married women wore at home at the time, but her uninhibited pose indicates that she may well be a courtesan. La Marchande de modes 1. Égl. François Boucher, Le Déjeuner, or The Breakfast, detail of fig. 1.48.
As a pictorial subgenre, the tableau de modes was in and of itself a visual symptom of the burgeoning consumer culture wherein fashion acquired a newly prominent status. This was due to a combination of factors, including the global expansion of trade, the wider availability of textiles, especially cotton, and dyes, and the development of new modes of manufacture that allowed for the production of cheaper versions of luxuries, that is, *populuxe* or *semiluxe* items. The silk stockings that the woman in *La Toilette* is putting on exemplify the populuxe articles that signaled the wider social spread of fashion. No longer limited to court elites, fashion was commercialized, affecting the functioning of society at large. Whereas in earlier times clothing was either made to measure for the rich or, in case of the poor, sewn by the wearers themselves, in the early eighteenth century we witness the emergence of new commer-

*(The Milliner)*, painted in 1746, was part of a larger commission orchestrated by Tessin for Crown Princess Louisa Ulrika of Sweden (fig. 1.57). Also known as *Morning*, it was to be the first of a series of paintings—never completed by Boucher—representing different activities performed at four times of day. Here, the morning toilette of a young lady has been interrupted by a visit from a modiste offering her wares. The paintings differ in tone, with *La Toilette*, commissioned by Tessin, being more frivolous than the perfectly decorous toilette scene painted for the Swedish princess. What they share, though, is an approach to fashion as both a social phenomenon and a cultural symptom of an ongoing change in the relation between representation and identity. This change is manifest in Boucher’s own approach to representation, specifically, his treatment of the tableau de modes as a particular type of image.

![Image](image1.png)

![Image](image2.png)
cial establishments producing ready-to-wear clothing, such as the one depicted in Antoine Raspail’s painting of 1760 where cheaper versions of elite dresses in printed cotton are shown hanging on the wall behind the seamstresses (fig. 1.58), and of the retailers, mostly female, known as the marchandes de mode, such as the one featured in Boucher’s painting for Louise Ulrich. Fashion ceased to be a discrete, socially circumscribed phenomenon, and became, in its diverse forms, an aspect of social life at large, permeating different social strata and generating a new corporal sensuality.272

Boucher’s two paintings engage with this new significance of fashion. In both paintings the concern for appearance is shown to have permeated the rituals of women’s everyday life and—albeit in a less direct mode—to have affected their social and personal identity. Fashion, however, also inflects Boucher’s approach to a genre scene, resulting not only in a new interpretation of the toilette theme but also in a novel mode of representation. Briefly put, his emphasis shifts from anecdote to description, from narration to enumeration.273 What results, in both paintings, is an image of an interior rich in material detail yet marked by an uncertainty of meaning.

It is, again, in comparison to earlier depictions of such scenes that Boucher’s distinct approach becomes salient. The iconography of a woman toilette was most often used in the eighteenth century to represent the situation ripe with erotic allusion. Such was, for example, Nicolas Lancret’s Morning, one of a series of paintings titled The Four Times of Day (an assignment similar to one of Boucher’s Swedish commissions), shown at the Salon of 1739. In Lancret’s canvas, the woman morning ritual has been interrupted by a visit from an abbé who is shown transfixed by his hostess’s intimate charms, which she “inadvertently” reveals to him while serving tea. Another example that may have directly inspired Boucher, Jean-François de Troy, The Garter, 1724. Oil on canvas. Musée Réattu, Arles.

It is the desirability of the material object—the attraction of commodity—that these toilette scenes stage. One may of course argue that La Toilette is still an essentially “male fantasy about how women behave in the absence of men,”274 and that, as such, it is addressed to an invisible male voyeur. The pose of the woman tying her garter is undeniably revealing and even sexually provocative. Yet such a reading—locating eros in the body—does not allow for the full appreciation of the investment in the fashionable item itself as the libidinal object in Boucher’s painting. The erotic subtext in this picture has less to do with interpersonal relations than with the relation of persons to things. This is what defines the main protagonist—the fashionable woman—in these scenes. Accessories are shown to be key in the production of her seductive appearance, and this production is what these paintings are “about.” La Toilette most explicitly in that it lets us in on the very process of dressing the body.

Sombart’s insight, evolved in the earlier section of this chapter, is also of relevance as it draws our attention to the sensuous satisfaction derived from commodity as imaginable on a level different from the interpersonal, and predictably gendered, dynamic between woman and man, or, between the figure in the painting and her imaginary viewer. It invites us to consider, before anything else, the personal gratification the depicted woman herself obtains from her bodily accessories, the pleasure of donning a commodity. What Boucher paints is the personal—and personalizing—dimension of fashion having to do with the sensory gratification provided by the thing. The glint of flesh next to the garter the woman ties around her stocking suggests just that. If it is an erotic tease, it evokes an eros that has less to do with courting, and male-female relations, as in de Troy, than with a budding human attraction to things. And it is things, as much as bodies, that La Toilette “shows off.” The sheer number of objects scattered about this small room and the very mode of their presentation—pell-mell, without hierarchy or order—is remarkable. The additive, discontinuous fashion in which they are represented—like a “laundry list” of luxurious and semiluxurious possessions, from an ornamental screen, to a China set, all kinds of decorative trinkets, a fan, and plethora of other items lying on the floor—renders this interior unkempt and confusing. Although not as crammed, the interior space of The Milliner also features a plethora of small possessions. The lady’s toilette accessories—teem on her table, and other personal belongings spill from the drawers of the small adjacent table, just as the milliner’s wares are drawn out of her box and strewn on the floor.

This quasi-enumerative mode of representation creates an impression—especially strong in La Toilette—of the painting as an elaborately disordered still life, rather than a genre scene. The attention given to the external details of women’s attire contributes to the sense of mild confusion between objects and beings. Boucher’s inclusive brush does not miss any aspect of his protagonists’ appearance: the slightly powdered hairdo called “tête de mouton” (a beauty spot) on her face; the peignoir to protect her dress from hair powder during its application, the elegant high-heel slippers both she and her servants wear, her servant’s shiny robe volante retroussée.275 In The Milliner, Boucher details the green satin morning robe decorated with falbalas, and the peignoir of the lady, her pale peach satin slipper with a buckle and bow showing from underneath the rim of her dress; the white gloves with cut-off fingers worn by...
the milliner, and so on. Through such details the women's bodies appear inscribed within a continuum of things, rather than a network of human relations, such as those envisioned in Lancret's and de Troy's tableaux de modes. This emphasis on sheer description raises the fundamental issue of meaning in these interior scenes—both how and what they signify. The disarray of objects in La Toilette has often been read emblematically, as a late-seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, as signs that possess a hidden moral meaning, here having to do with the sexual promiscuity of the woman.277 The motif of the cat playing with the ball of yarn on the floor, almost directly under the woman's petticoat, seems a rather obvious sexual reference, as does the steaming pot of tea next to her, or the open fireplace with a log burning inside. The general disorder of things in this interior would stand for a moral disorder, constituting an indirect commentary on the conduct of its inhabitant.

Yet Boucher's insistently descriptive and disordered presentation of objects may well be seen as canceling out their potentially emblematic eloquence. Such an assortment of fashionable bagatelles—most of which are recognizable as specific imports in the latest chinoiserie taste—amounts not to a network of symbolic allusions but to a mere collection of things, the materialization of commodities as such. Their random appearance cramping the interior resembles the commercial space from which some of these objects came, such as the imagined Chinese merchant's outlet of exportable exotica depicted by an unknown artist (fig. 1.66).279 This is not to say that the objects in Boucher's painting have no meaning but that their meaning is linked to the effect of metonymy rather than metaphor: generated by the relation of contiguity, rather than depth, it glides on the paintings' surface. Their random accumulation points to their contingency as signifiers of fashion, their status as at once desirable and superfluous things with an uncertain and unstable significance dependent on the current fad. It is precisely this quintessentially aspect of luxury, its superfluity, that Boucher makes obvious. If these provisionally assembled things—the porcelain bird, the teapot, the fan, the garter—speak, it is in a language different from their Dutch predecessors in that it lacks moral coherence or, for that matter, any signifying consistency. The mobile, metonymic structure of the painting matches its thematic of commercial exchange but also underscores the nature of this commercially induced desire, its logic based in continuous substitution—a metamorphosis of one thing, for another, with no loss or lack involved.280 And what this pro-visional, libidinally invested mode of presentation helps convey is the quality of life under their spell, a mode of existence governed by the principles of randomness, change, and sensual pleasure.

At the time Boucher was painting, the effect of fashion on everyday life was a favored subject of social commentary. Many contemporary observers derided or deplored fashionable consumption as the mindless pursuit of novelty and as such a marker of social decline.9 West Louis Muralt, a Swiss traveler visiting Paris in the 1720s, exemplifies a typical reaction of dismay at the pace with which fashion produced changes in the mode of dressing in the capital. Even servants, he observed with mild alarm, were required to be stylish and could be dismissed simply on the grounds of not following the latest fad.281 Writing in the mid-1730s, Deslandes paints a similar picture of French society in the grip of fashion: “To change the style of their clothing or of their furniture every six months seem nothing but a light distraction. . . . Being outmoded is a terrible embarrassment, a failure of taste, of invention.”282 La Toilette represents this mode of fashionable living, it does not impart a sense of indignation about it. Boucher's women clearly belong to the elegant society (le beau monde) defined, in Deslandes's words, by taste “for the frivolous, the apparent, for a certain external decoration.”283 But Boucher restraints from opining, he describes. Even if one can discern an occasional residual metaphor within his essentially descriptive mode of representation—such as a cat playing under the woman's skirt, or a motif imported from Northern genre painting—there is no consist ent moral program in this painting. Boucher's image signifies promiscuously, inconsistently, equivocally, and is therefore as disorienting or confusing as the interior it represents. This ambivalent mode of signification signifies what these paintings are “about” not traditional morality but the new ethics of consumption. Their subjects are the pleasures of shopping and of fashionable possessions and the mode in which these pleasures redefine human comport ment and the meaning of life in the era of consumption, which is to say of life with and in things. In this regard, they tell us something more specific than what Voltière, for one, had to say about the matter. Suggesting a degree of abstraction, of instability by the very means in which they construct their meaning, these paintings formulate a new language of things that is both legible and unreliable.

This uncertainty or inconsistency of meaning manifests itself also in the definition of the individuals in these paintings—their relationships and their identity. If we saw the social identity of the woman tying her garter as dubious, we are no more certain about the identity of her attendant. Sartorially, she does not seem to differ much from her mistress (fig. 1.66). Wearing a robe volante, also known as a robe néglige, tucked into the pockets of her petticoat for comfort, silk stockings, high-heel mules, and a lace cap, she appears as aware of it, as the main protagonist of this scene. She may well be, as some commentators have sug gested, a modiste rather than a maid.284 (We may note that, in Boucher's preparatory drawing, this fig ure is drawn in a shorter version of the robe volante typically worn by maidservants and, more generally, lower-class women, though the elaborate ruffles on her sleeves, more typical of elite dress, are still confusing as indicators of her status (fig. 1.63).)285 A similar effect can be discerned in The Milliner where the modiste, in her striped robe and flossed sleeves, a black satin mantle, a lace cap, and gloves, is no less modishly clad than her client. It is only the position she occupies on the floor, at the foot of the lady that indicates her subservient status. Using dress to blur as much as define his figures' social rank, Boucher registers changes occasioned in French society by fashion and the rise of populuxe goods. In the early decades of the eighteenth century the strict distinctions and hierarchies of usage governed by sumptuary laws began to disappear, resulting in a new confused and confusing semiology of clothing.286 The resulting confusion of social signs was commented upon with increasing fre quency throughout the eighteenth century. Thus the Marquis de Mirabeau complained in 1756 about paying profuse compliments to a man wearing a coat of black silk drapet and a well-powdered wig who turned out to be “his saddler's head assistant.”287 Another contemporary commentator reporting on the changes wrought by fashion in the everyday life of the provincial town of Montpellier found it profoundly revolting that “a chambermaid [was] as art fully decked out as her mistress.”288 Games of imitation and role reversals between masters and servants rendered possible by fashion developments were the subjects of plays written by Marivaux in the 1720s and '30s, such as L'âme de la Baison and L'âme des Esclaves.289 As Daniel Roche has observed, changes in the uses of clothing scrambled the marks of social
rank and, to an extent, also the rank to themselves. “Valets and masters, maidservants and mistresses were confused in the urban theater as they had long been in theatrical convention.”

In his theaters of domesticity, Boucher stages a similar kind of confusion. Fashion in his paintings is shown as a source of these women’s identity but also as the very factor that destabilizes it. Elaborately clad, both mistresses and their attendants are linked by the mimicry that the historian Sarah Maza speaks of in her analysis of the relations between masters and servants in eighteenth-century France. By the cant transformation of his predecessor’s figural language: from a fashionable person in Watteau, the woman has morphed in Boucher’s work into a cipher of fashion itself. How a woman has been in theatrical convention. “Valets and masters, maidservants and mistresses were confused in the urban theater as they had long been on everyone’s lips and may well have been read by Boucher. In one of the most striking passages, Marivaux describes the social debut of his heroine, who, having found employment and modest income, arrives at church for Sunday mass dressed for the occasion: “The seat I have chosen put me in the midst of people… What a feast! It was the first time that I was going to relish the merit of my smart figure. I was so moved by the pleasure of imagining what it [my appearance] would bring about that I was almost breathless. For I was sure of my success, and my vanity saw in advance all the looks that would fall on me.”

This act of self-display provides Marianne with a sense of previously unknown gratification. It also produces in her an enhanced self-awareness linked to being a spectacle that she herself produces and controls. Having become self-conscious about operating under the gaze of others, she calculates all her movements and gestures to produce the best possible effect. For example, she feels compelled to repeatedly adjust her headdress (coiffé) so that her “naked hand could thus be shown, a gesture that entailed also the exposure of almost half of my well-rounded fashion. We are dealing with a different kind of etherealness than Watteau’s. Rather than being reticent, our servant/modiste seems to thrive on self-exposure: she is the embodiment of promiscuous self-display. And as such, Boucher’s figure represents something broader than herself: she evokes a new mode of social behavior and the new mode of subjective existence it entailed.

proof of the importance of the Watteau’s work for Boucher’s own (fig. 1.63). But the way in which Boucher uses this figure signals a subtle but significant transformation of his predecessor’s figural language: a fashionable person in Watteau, the woman has morphed in Boucher’s work into a cipher of fashion itself. How a femme de chambre performing her functions as a personal body servant to her mistress could look is illustrated by Boucher’s drawing of a similar, if far less ambiguous scene, now in Stockholm (fig. 1.64). By comparison with the solicitous maid tying her mistress’s corset in the Stockholm sheet, the pose of our figure seems indeed more fitting to a marchande de modes than a servant not only in how she holds the bonnet but also in the way she presents herself. Her entire body is shaped by what appears to be a deliberate act of sartorial demonstration, and her face shown in profil perdu contributes to the impression that her figure has taken on the role of human physiognomy—of

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The idea of cutting a good figure is shown to have affected not only one's mode of dressing but also one's body language.443 Down to the smallest gesture, Marianne’s comportment is permeated by the imperative of visual promiscuity, that is, by a readiness to receive a randomized glance at no one in particular, a glance as such. Acutely aware of existing in the visual field of the other, Marianne represents a new idea of the self as a function of what I have called the world’s gaze, which becomes the defining condition of her social but also her subjective existence. (She imagines herself in relation to the pleasure she produces in others.) This kind of promiscuous receptiveness to the look of others is shown, moreover, to be part of a broad social phenomenon in which different social strata, both men and women, partake. Describing the people gathered in the church, she observes: “I saw them leaning down, or prop- ping themselves up, then straightening up, passing smiles and greetings left and right, less by politeness or social duty than in order to varigate their poses, to appear nice or important, and show themselves from different sides.”446

It is precisely the self-conscious performance of the body (and self) that we witness in the figure of Boucher’s servant. Turned away from us so as to bet- ter display her sartorial accomplishments, she is visibly caught in a calculated effort—note the slight strain in her neck—to show herself to her best advan- tage. She conveys the idea that her performance is not addressed to anyone in particular—neither us nor anyone else in this picture—but to the idea of the look itself that she has internalized and that shapes the mode of her appearance and her understanding of herself. Showing off in front of no one, in a thor- oughly private space, this femme de chambre is an instance of visual promiscuity—"(the world's gaze), a principle through which one's own sense of oneself is produced and reinforced. In Boucher, this principle is mediated primarily by things that are not only prominent but also endowed with their own look. Such is notably, in La Toilette, the pair of eyes castigating a glance at the scene from the portrait hanging on the wall, the rest of the face to which they belong being cropped by the folding screen. That screen, an architectural element of clothing, is the most prominent and perhaps the most elo-quent signifier of the worldly look in the sense I am suggesting.450 Staged against it, Boucher’s figures are simultaneously set off from the rest of their interior and pushed forward to view. Thus, paradoxically, while procuring privacy for the lady’s intimate rit-ual, the folding screen also exposes her and her atten- dant. As such, it serves an important function: it underscores the provisional and promiscuous nature of identity defined through appearances but also its new imaginary dimension. The screen suggests an internal division within the self, making evident the existence of an extra space behind the foreground theater of appearances, a room from within which the self may cast a look at itself (as does the portrait) and imagine itself. This decorative object may be seen to formulat an argument similar to that of the mirror in the Breakfast, namely, that the nascent cul- ture of consumption inaugurates a self that is volatile, surface-bound, an illusion of bliss but also ultimately irreducible to these qualities—a self that exceeds itself.

The Milliner shares in this logic of promiscuity—the logic of the subject in the era of consumption—mani- fest in the body language of its protagonists, for example, in the way the lady’s body “opens” up to view as she unravels the ribbon, her gesture defining not only what she does but how she is in the world, her movements and gestures, even in the privacy of her bedroom, permeated by the notion of self-display. Accordingly, the bedroom itself is defined as a locus of display: Although the space opens up to an acrobe bed, a site of potentially gallant associations, it is not gallantry as much as promiscuity—in the sense that I am proposing—that is at stake here, a point made clear by comparison to de Troy’s Lady Attaching a Bow to a Gentleman’s Sword (1754), which depicts a similar situation (fig. 1.68).458 Boucher not only sup- plants the courting scene with a basic ritual of con- sumption, dispensing with the male character and moving the milliner herself from a position on the