

Layers of Fantasy in François Boucher's *The Toilette of Venus*

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## Abstract

*The Toilette of Venus* by François Boucher, 1751, depicts the mythical goddess, Venus. The painting was commissioned by Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, better known as Madame de Pompadour, chief mistress to King Louis XV of France and Boucher's best patron. Featuring a nude woman perched on a luxurious sofa, surrounded by winged putti and exotic metal ornament, Boucher's *Venus* turned heads in the eighteenth-century and her popularity persists in the twenty-first. She inhabits the apex of fantasy — sensual, available, and just out of reach.

Upon first glance *The Toilette of Venus* appears to be in a setting appropriate to its mythological origin. However, when observed more closely it is evident that something new is happening. Boucher's *Venus* broke with the canonical representation of a mythological nude by integrating the popular style of turquerie, then the height of fashion due to shifting cultural and economic conditions. By applying twentieth-century visual theory to the image it is clear that Boucher took layers of both genres and wove them together into a new type of fantasy image, appropriate only for Madame de Pompadour's new space in the Château de Bellevue. In order to understand why Boucher employed these techniques and their intended effect we must detangle the layers of objects and style by exploring the cultural, economic, and sociological conditions in which Boucher produced *The Toilette of Venus*.

# 1. Introduction

Crackled oil paint in rich hues depict an opulent interior. Heavy silk curtains frame a nude woman, sitting upright on an ornately carved sofa. *The Toilette of Venus* by François Boucher, 1751 (fig. 1), depicts the mythical goddess, Venus. Doves nestle at her breast while winged putti play with her hair. She sits in her private suite, surrounded by furniture and opulent decor, face silhouetted against a classical garden just visible in the background. Commissioned by Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, better known as Madame de Pompadour, chief mistress to King Louis XV of France, the painting is a complex Rococo composition. Boucher's *Venus* turned heads in the eighteenth-century and her popularity persists in the twenty-first. Her visage is on the cover of books and her body the subject of hundreds of academic articles. Boucher's *Venus* is plastered on everything from cell phone cases to tote bags in museum gift shops. She has traveled from New York to Paris, St. Petersburg, and now Tokyo.

There is little doubt that the *Toilette of Venus* is a pretty image. On a neutral museum wall, illuminated by spotlights, her opulent surroundings stand out as new and fascinating. The luxe, jewel toned background and ornate gold is fascinating to the modern-day museum goer. To the eighteenth-century aristocrat these objects were understood as part of larger genres and subjects. In the intimate space of the Château de Bellevue *Venus* reflected and amplified her surroundings.

While the *Toilette of Venus* is one of Boucher's most famous works, this scene is unusual for him. *Venus* is unlike Boucher's other goddesses in ways only perceptible to the observant eye and with theoretical framework. Of Boucher's dozens of painted goddesses, she is the only *Venus* indoors, surrounded by prominent ornament. *Venus* contains multiple styles, pulled from many cultures. She inhabits the apex of fantasy — sensual, available, and just out of reach. In

order to achieve this for Madame de Pompadour, Boucher utilized multiple layers of appropriated cultural symbols and built on art history itself. In the end he produced a piece that reflected the most private spaces at Bellevue.

## 1.1 Method of Approach

François Boucher painted dozens of other Venuses in his career, and all fall neatly within a single genre. For example, in *The Triumph of Venus*, (fig. 2) the setting is exclusively mythical, the figures fit with the setting, the objects fit with the figures. In the 1740 painting Venus lounges on a rocky outcrop posed just above the splashing waves. A muscular man lifts up a nymph to present the goddess with a shell of pearls. Another nymph cradles her neighbor, her foot bursting through a suggestively shaped shell that holds a putto. Winged putti flit in and out of frame as decoration, just like the vegetation and statue behind them. There is no attempt at narrative, rather an intentionally composed jumble of bodies that sets itself apart from history paintings.<sup>1</sup> A work such as *The Triumph of Venus* is cohesive with previous canonical depictions of Venus. Psychologically, according to Gestalt and visual theory, viewers associate what they see with their understanding of the historical representation and of Venus and conclude that all of the aspects of *The Triumph of Venus* fit together.

Boucher's *The Toilette of Venus* departs significantly from the artist's own norms of representation. Venus sits straight up on a lush divan, modestly covered. There are no languishing nymphs, only smaller winged Eros attending to her hair. Instead of a foaming sea she is on land, inside with walls covered with thick drapes. Unlike *The Triumph of Venus*, *The Toilette of Venus* does not align with previous representations of Venus. In *The Toilette of Venus* there are layers

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<sup>1</sup> Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation," *Representations* 73, no. 1 (2001): pp. 54-88, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2001.73.1.54>, 294.

of visual information, some of which we associate with Venus, and some of which diverge from mythology entirely. Through the lens of visual theory it becomes apparent there are two distinct layers of “similar” objects.

In order to investigate what these objects are, what comprises each layer of similarity, and why Boucher may have used layers, I will engage with methodology that blends sociological, including Marxist, methodology and an Iconographic approach in the way most appropriate for each subject.<sup>2</sup> This multi-methodological approach will be guided by scholars who have devoted their careers to the eighteenth century, including Melisa Hyde, Perrin Stein, and Katie Scott. Their work provides the framework for investigating Boucher’s work not as the product of genius but a set of carefully compiled social semiotics designed to satisfy the patron and present a manipulated image of their role to society, dependent on the privacy and audience in mind. These scholars lay the groundwork for further exploration into the layers of *The Toilette of Venus*.

The identity of the subject in *Venus* has been discussed by many eighteenth-century scholars with little consensus.<sup>3</sup> Some propose that the central figure is Madame de Pompadour, some believe that she is a conduit of Pompadour’s power, and some maintain that she is simply Venus. As this subject has been well researched and written about I do not intend to engage in the argument over her identity, rather the identity of the setting and objects around the main

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<sup>2</sup> Hyde’s theory demonstrates that Madame de Pompadour used Boucher’s portraits to “make up” her changing public identity. Stein’s approach to Orientalism before the nineteenth-century allows us to discuss the role of turquerie and exoticism in *Venus*, allowing us to access Said’s theory without incorrectly imposing colonialist theory on a pre-colonialist, materialistic mentality. Scott’s essay *Framing Ambition: The Interior Politics of Mme de Pompadour*, takes a look at the space through the “language” and intricacies of decorating the Chateau de Bellevue. She presents the idea that the interior can be read, and how to read a space.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as Donald Posner, Melissa Hyde, and Katharine Baetjer have engaged with this topic in multiple publications.

figure. Instead, this paper's goal is to interpret the mixed layers of visual reference in *The Toilette of Venus* and why Boucher used them.

Boucher intentionally intertwined the cultural material available to him. To understand it requires disentangling these layers of objects and style to understand the cultural, economic, and sociological conditions in which Boucher produced *The Toilette of Venus* and within the Château de Bellevue.

## 2. Artist and Patron

### 2.1 The Life and Legacy of François Boucher

François Boucher was born in Paris to a family of artists and was trained by his father in painting from an early age. As a young man he was employed by Jean de Jullienne making etchings after Antoine Watteau. Boucher became an accomplished draftsman and printmaker, two crafts he utilized throughout his career. Upon traveling to Italy in 1728 he was exposed to the Baroque masters as well as Dutch landscape painters. He was *reçu* (received) at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1734 as a history painter and began working with well-known society figures.<sup>4</sup> Word of Boucher's talent spread quickly, and he became the most highly sought-after artist for his large-scale mythological scenes. The *gens du monde*, Paris fashionable elite, and *grand mond*, courtly nobility, were so taken with Boucher's work that he at times worked twelve-hour days to keep up with demand.<sup>5</sup> By 1765 Boucher was appointed as first painter to King Louis XV as well as director of the *Académie Royale*, the two most prestigious positions in France for an artist.

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<sup>4</sup> Alastair Lang, *François Boucher, 1703-1770: The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Melissa Hyde, *Making up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics* (Getty Publ., 2006), 112.

The Rococo (and therefore Boucher's popularity) have gone in and out of fashion since its decline in the late 1780s. The Enlightenment philosophers and painters were firmly against Rococo effeminacy and images without moral value. Philosopher and art critic Denis Diderot campaigned against Boucher's use of overtly idealized imagery, specifically his painted faces which Diderot claimed were identical and thus unreal.<sup>6</sup> To him Boucher was the epitome of a painting with no moral value as they represented fantasy and not reality. Referencing Boucher's fondness for the frilly style and preference for centering nude buttocks, Diderot published in the Salon of 1759 the accusation that "Boucher no longer has but two colors: white and red; and he does not paint a single nude woman without her bottom being made up as faces."<sup>7</sup> Their lifelong rivalry over the nature of art and bodies included an accusation from Diderot that Boucher had prostituted his own wife.

Diderot's harsh criticism of Boucher may have influenced the modern art historical perspective of the Rococo as frivolous fantasy that lacked substance. While art critics drew towards the grounded realism of the new Neoclassicism, Boucher continued to produce fantasy works. As the centuries wore on Boucher's popularity was reinvigorated and denounced again and again. Even within the unstable popularity of the Rococo, Boucher has always been regarded as its de facto leader and the exemplification of French aesthetics. Melissa Hyde in *Making Up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics* describes Diderot's response to Boucher as sparking the historical discourse on the value of the Rococo in terms of contrast, "feminine versus masculine, artificial versus natural, retrogressive versus progressive, meaningless versus meaningful." These oppositions may cause the characterization of Rococo artists as "frothy anti

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<sup>6</sup> Denis Diderot and John Goodman, *Diderot on Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Denis Diderot and John Goodman, *Diderot on Art*.

enlightenment painters.”<sup>8</sup> Even amidst critiques of his skill Boucher’s patrons included the king, C.G. Tessen the Swedish ambassador to Paris and noted art collector, and Madame de Pompadour – chief mistress to the king. Boucher’s portraits of Pompadour became some of his most popular paintings and have retained their status into modern day.

## 2.2 The Power of a Well Made-Up Woman

Jeanne Antoinette Poisson was better known as Madame de Pompadour, *maîtresse déclarée*, (chief mistress) to the king. She was the presumed daughter of Lenomand de Tournehem, a wealthy financier, who saw to her education and was determined to see her elevated from *bourgeois* to elite. He was elevated to Primary Architect as he collected and forged relations. Pompadour met Louis XV in a highly orchestrated introduction at a costumed ball. She quickly grew to be the king’s lover, then closest confidant, and finally friend. In her capacity as the *maîtresse déclarée* of the king she was afforded enormous freedom and authority for a woman at the time.<sup>9</sup> While history now views Madame de Pompadour as an ennobled figure, in her time she shouldered much of the criticism for the king’s actions and was ridiculed in the court. Short spiteful poems known as *poissonades* defamed her maiden name.<sup>10</sup>

Her close relationship with the king provided unique benefits. Pompadour would come to control audiences with the king and orchestrated meetings that would benefit both her family and her power. Her brother was promoted to the Marquis de Marginy and became closely involved with the arts. She was so involved with French artistic production that it was on her advice that the crown began the porcelain industry at Sèvres.<sup>11</sup> She frequently threw galas, comedic operas,

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<sup>8</sup> Hyde. *Making Up the Rococo*. 134.

<sup>9</sup> Evelyne Lever, *Madame De Pompadour: A Life* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003), 20.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 21.

<sup>11</sup> Hyde. *Making up the Rococo*. 3.

and theater pieces in which she starred. In one play she starred as Venus, Roman goddess of love.

In 1750 François Boucher was commissioned to paint a portrait of Madame de Pompadour at her toilette, or vanity mirror. Remarking on the portrait, she told her brother that it was “very pretty” but ultimately did not resemble her much.<sup>12</sup> Even with Boucher’s noted failure in capturing her resemblance, Boucher went on to paint a full length garden portrait of Pompadour in 1755, multiple full length indoor portraits, and a portrait entitled *Madame de Pompadour at her Toilette* in 1759 today housed at the Fogg Museum. The last *Toilette* shows Pompadour at a small dressing table wearing a sheer lace cape worn to protect the clothes while preparing for the day. She dons her signature rouge, the small make up brush held to her face with dainty fingers (fig. 3). The purpose of these portraits was not to capture her resemblance, but to make up her identity as the *maîtresse déclarée*. Pompadour continued to employ Boucher not because she believed he could create an accurate portrait, but that she could have input into her representation with an artist who was no stranger to embellishment.

Throughout their work together, Pompadour and Boucher maintained a close relationship, more equal friendship than that of patron and artist. He taught the marquise how to draw and etch and helped her produce her own prints. As an amateur artist herself Pompadour had an intimate understanding of how an image was crafted. By the time Madame de Pompadour sat for Boucher’s last portrait of her in 1759 she was suffering from multiple physical ailments, but her oil paint avatar remained rosy cheeked and nubile due to Boucher’s ability to capture spirit, as opposed to likeness. Perhaps he could capture the fantasy space she wished to inhabit as well.

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<sup>12</sup> Donald Posner. "Mme. De Pompadour as a Patron of the Visual Arts." *The Art Bulletin* 72, no. 1 (1990): 74-105. Accessed March 22, 2021. doi:10.2307/3045718. 26

Pompadour was also a real estate connoisseur. She oversaw the construction of the Petit Trianon at Versailles. Just two years later she purchased the Hôtel d'Evreux in Paris with her own funds in 1753. The Hôtel d'Evreux became known as the Élysée-Napoléon upon Napoleon I's occupation in 1809. The residence eventually became the seat of the French power and residence of the president starting in 1874. The current plan retains much of Pompadour's renovations and design.

She began work on the Château de Bellevue in 1748 as a small square plan. The château was located in Meudon, part way between Paris and Versailles, overlooking the east bank on the Seine. Many of the commissioned pieces from Boucher by Pompadour was for her Bellevue apartments. In her private suites at the newly constructed Château de Bellevue, Pompadour turned to Boucher, an artist she had worked closely with before. For the bathing suites she commissioned *The Toilette of Venus* (1751) and a companion piece *The Bath of Venus* (1751), (fig. 4).<sup>13</sup> She later added two large overdoor paintings, the *Setting of the Sun* (1752) and the *Rising of the Sun* (1753). *The Bath of Venus* is an outdoor scene featuring a nude Venus surrounded by three winged babies that was mounted over the second internal door in the bathing suites. Unlike *The Toilette of Venus*, this goddess is outside, sitting on a deep blue silk while dipping a toe into a small pool of water near two resting doves. Both the reoccurring and altered elements that appear in both pieces must be taken into consideration as particularly intentional components of Boucher's vision.

Upon Pompadour's death the Château de Bellevue was taken over by Louis XV's second mistress Madame Du Barry and was willed to his daughters who fled at the onset of the French

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<sup>13</sup> Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation," *Representations* 73, no. 1 (2001): pp. 54-88, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2001.73.1.54>, 294.

Revolution. It fell to ruins and in 1823 was demolished. Only walls of the ice house remain having been integrated into the buildings of the city.

*Toilette of Venus* was removed from the Château de Bellevue after Pompadour's death in 1764. The painting was bequeathed to her brother, Abel-François Poisson, Marquis de Marginy. The painting was then sold into private ownership, transferred post mortem in 1782, 1787, and 1788. Upon his death Jean-François Marin bequeathed it to a certain Le Brun, first name unknown. It was then in the family of the Comtes de la Béraudière in Paris until it was purchased in 1895 by the Vanderbilt family of New York and was installed in the boudoir of socialite Mrs. William K. Vanderbilt. Upon Mr. Vanderbilt's death it was bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1920 where it has remained in the collection.<sup>14</sup> The first exhibition was in 1936 and it has been shown consistently there and around the world since 1951.

Regardless of the input of Madame de Pompadour or the use of artistic license by Boucher, the *Toilette of Venus* is a collaboration between two of the most influential figures of the eighteenth-century. Pompadour as the second most powerful woman in France had access to any artist to depict her faithfully or paint scenes to her specifications. Instead she continually chose to work with an artist who did not depict an accurate portrait but successfully captured the power and position she wished to present.

### 3. The Painting

In technical terms, *The Toilette of Venus* 1751 is an exquisite painting. A nude woman, presumably the titular Venus, sits on an ornate chaise in the center of the piece. The seat is

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<sup>14</sup> "The Toilette of Venus - Provenance," Metmuseum (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), accessed March 2022, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435739>.

covered in pink velvet and the gilded frame is carved into detailed scrolls. The woman sits upright on thick gold fabric which pools at her feet. One knee is bent and the other fully extended to the rich gold fabric at the foot of the chaise. Her back arm rests on her raised knee and a hand frames her face. The other cups a white dove to her breast. A striped transparent chiffon is tucked between her thighs, visually creating the lightest area in the piece. Her face is framed by a background of deep blue satin curtains which are pulled back as the stage of a theater to reveal a pastoral landscape and classical column. The landscape scene silhouettes the putti as they tend to Venus. A winged putto with fat rolls and rosy cheeks arranges her hair.<sup>15</sup> Another holds the end of a blue ribbon tied around the white dove pressed to her breast, while another dove rests at her feet. The third putto plays besides Venus, reaching his chubby hands into a silver shell-shaped platter to handle long strands of pearls. A bronze ewer lies on its side near blue, white, and pink flowers strewn on the floor. Next to the chaise lounge is an ornate bronze censer, or incense burner, which releases delicate scented smoke that dissipates into the air. Behind Venus' extended leg a heavily ornamented gold mirror leans on an unseen wall, and carved flowers adorn the top of the golden oval.

Blue is echoed throughout the painting, from in the flower in Venus' hair, the blue ribbons, to the flowers on the floor. The deep berry-pink silk against Venus' blushed skin contrasts with the blue behind her, drawing the eye to Venus' body. The blue sky of the landscape perfectly silhouettes her face and draws out the rose tint in her cheeks and lips. Her skin is highlighted with the same pink, only to create emphasis on the contours of her breasts and arms. Most of her skin is a pale expanse, the yellow undertones brought out by her surroundings. While her extended leg maintains the pink tint of her cheeks, the center of her body remains

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<sup>15</sup> Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology* (ABC-Clio, 1999).

almost cold. The triangle of her body takes up almost a third of the canvas. While her face is soft and warm, the expanse of color that makes up her torso is closed off — her breast and loins are covered. Unlike many Boucher's Venus compositions, most of her body is obscured. She has not been exposed; she is showing herself.

The putti, divan, censer, ewer, mirror, pearls, shells, doves, all act as ornamental elements in this painting, but serve a further role in the composition. The ornamental pieces are almost entirely gold. The gold keeps the viewer's eye moving around Venus' body, creating distinct points around the piece. The chaise' frame, the mirror, the ewer, and the censer are all stars in this constellation. Venus' relatively plain body could easily be lost in a sea of ornamentation.

She resides in a fantasy world, both inside and outside, on the most luxurious riches wealth could buy. Oriental objects glint and transport the sitter to a far-away land where pleasure is not just a possibility but a guarantee.

Our twenty-first century brains might see *Venus* as overbearing in the sheer amount of visual stimuli, but to the upper elite in the Chateau de Bellevue the ornament would be understood because of their familiarity with Classical art and mythology. Gestalt principles group these objects together by context and similarity. What makes these objects similar can be found in the history of representations of Venus as an artistic genre from Antiquity to the Rococo. While the objects are similar to each other, their collective history are at odds with their stylization and setting. The history of the mythological goddess is key to understanding Boucher's intention in utilizing these ornamental elements for his discerning client.

*The Toilette of Venus* emphasizes the familiar attributes of Venus in a way that triggers Gestalt theory and Gombrich's visual theory. In Gestalt terms they are similar. They are viewed together because of this similarity. The similar context of the attributes form a connected layer

separate from the background. Viewed through Gombrich's visual theory, what the breakfinder actually alerts to is the disconnect between the objects and the setting. The similarities are not what interests us in *The Toilette of Venus*, for they have been examined thoroughly, but the innovation of the layering of two distinct genres. The first is the mythic Venus, the second is the genre of turquerie.

The multiple layers of coded objects in the composition of *The Toilette of Venus* is unprecedented and does not appear in any of his previous works. Previous mythological works by Boucher like the *Triumph of Venus* only contain one layer of coda – that of mythos. The setting is exclusively mythical, the figures fit with the setting, which carries on previous canonical depictions of Venus. *Venus* contains two disparate layers of “like” objects that are applied over each other but not necessarily merged. These layers are that of myth, the previous style, and turquerie, a specifically eighteenth century fascination with exoticism, and myth. Those objects coded as turquerie are intended to heighten the sense of fantasy in the piece. Our *Venus* diverges from the canonical depictions of Venus because of these applied layers of fantasy.

#### 4. The Mythology of Venus

*The Toilette of Venus* is based in the fantasy of mythology. Boucher's oeuvre contains at least sixty-seven paintings of Venus.<sup>16</sup> The goddess has been a popular figure in art since

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<sup>16</sup> Based on calculation of his oeuvre in the catalogue raisonne Alexandre Ananoff, François Boucher, vol. II (Lausanne: La Bibliothèque des Arts, 1976).

antiquity. The dalliances of the pantheon were a popular theme in the Rococo, who were particularly infatuated with tales of the goddess of love.

Venus, known as Aphrodite to the Greeks, originated in the Phoenician goddess Astarte, who herself was derived from the Semitic Ishtar. Venus was said to have been born, fully formed, from the foam of the ocean polluted with the seed of Uranus.<sup>17</sup>

The legacy of Venus would be as obvious to the contemporary viewer as viewers today. Famous goddesses of love include the *Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli from 1485, *Sleeping Venus* 1510 by Giorgione, Titian's *Venus of Urbino* 1534, all the way back to the Greek sculptures and representations for temples dedications.

There are carefully chosen symbols and elements of ancient mythos that have been associated with the depiction of Venus since antiquity. As far back as the first Greek temples to Aphrodite the goddess has been associated with certain symbols that helped identify her in representation and which goods to offer for her favor. She is commonly shown with items such as a mirror, shell, pearls, dove, apple, and myrtle leaf, flowers, water, and her son Eros.<sup>18</sup> Eros, or Cupid to the Romans, is depicted as a winged nude child, over time evolving to a chubby baby associated with love and lust, termed putti in Italian.

An Attic Red Figure lekythos from 370 BCE (fig. 5) depicts a seated Aphrodite. On her left a winged Eros brings her a hand mirror, and on her right another figure brings her a strand of pearls. Flowers spring from the ground and the upper key has a floral motif. Thus the objects conventionally associated with Venus were already determined approximately 1,850 years prior

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<sup>17</sup> Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology* (ABC-Clio, 1999).

<sup>18</sup> Mike Dixon-Kennedy, *Encyclopedia of Greco-Roman Mythology* (ABC-Clio, 1999).

to Boucher's pieces. However, these attributes were cemented aesthetically in the Renaissance as mythological scenes became an acceptable alternative to Christian works.

The 1520 painting *Venus and Cupid* by Lorenzo Lotto clearly demonstrates the attributes of Venus (fig. 6). A nude woman lounges prone on blue fabric spread on grass. Above her head hangs a seashell, her diadem is fitted with pearls, a blue ribbon is tied around her wrist, and flower petals litter the scene. She holds a wreath with an incense burner while Cupid, a putto, stands over her. Those educated and wealthy enough to have taken the grand tour would be familiar with both the Italian and French representations of the goddess.

Intimate scenes of Venus were a favorite subject of Boucher. Yet *The Toilette of Venus* stands out when compared to the dozens of other Venus-themed paintings he produced over his career. The precedent for Boucher's Venuses was set many years before. Looking at Boucher's painting the *Triumph of Venus* 1740 just ten years earlier, he included many of the same attributes. Yet the *Triumph of Venus* is set in the ocean. In the frothing sea a nude Venus sprawls on waves reaching towards the sky.

In the *Triumph of Venus*, her body is pale and bathed in light. Upright but casual, her face is nondescript Rococo beauty. Unlike Pompadour's *Venus* here she is relaxed, not looking at the viewer but fully passive. The attributes are still visible so that the identification of Venus is clear, but there are no gilded divans, heavy furniture, or brocade drapes. Instead there is an arc of fabric wafting through the air. Underneath groups of doves surrounding the central nude, maidens lay on giant fish. The scale is grand, and Venus is one of many nude figures, including male bodies. A nymph on the left floats on a wave, leaning her head against a muscular male, lolled back in a state of ecstasy. Her hand rests on her inner thigh, her privacy protected by two white doves, while a phallic fish tail erupts next to her. Another man looks towards the nymph as saltwater

drips in thin waterfalls from a vulvic shell hoisted over his shoulders and falls to his thighs. The forms are overtly sexual. Madame de Pompadour had seen the *Triumph of Venus* and she was well aware of Boucher's favorite topic.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike *Triumph's* orgiastic display, Pompadour's *Venus* is a carefully crafted scene of sexual control. *Triumph* is wild, carnal, figures literally writhing in the froth of the sea. While in contrast, *Venus* features a single woman, in her own home, with total control of her surroundings. Unlike *Triumph*, the scene has fewer moving parts and only one central figure. Our Venus shares the spotlight with no one. Of the dozens of Venuses Boucher painted in his lifetime, *The Toilette of Venus* is the only scene that takes place in an interior space.

The objects surrounding Venus— her putti, pearls, shell, flowers, ewer, incense, doves— contain a coded connection that may not be accessible to the twenty-first century viewer but was connected within art history to the eighteenth-century viewer.<sup>20</sup> Boucher intentionally used these elements in *The Toilette of Venus* and in his previous mythological work.<sup>21</sup> However, unlike Boucher's other Venuses like *Triumph*, *The Toilette of Venus* does not hide or obscure the attributes in the setting, but highlights the objects through placement and color. In *Venus*, Boucher placed a silver platter in the shape of a shell just behind the bronze ewer. A putto stretches his chubby hands over the platter to play with a long string of pearls entangled with a blue ribbon. A string of pearls this long was not just a sign of immense wealth, but also of the sea. Pink, white, and blue flowers are scattered on the floor. While in *Triumph* the shells and

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<sup>19</sup> Hedley. *Seductive Visions*, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Theresa Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses, and Cupids: Sexuality, Hermeneutics, and English Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1996), 80.

<sup>21</sup> R. J. Barrow et al., *Gender, Identity and the Body in Greek and Roman Sculpture* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 18.

incense burner recede in size compared to the figures, the heavy, metal, shined objects are pushed forward compositionally in the 1751 *Venus*.

To what end are these objects highlighted and why are they different than Boucher's other pieces? Madame de Pompadour did not need to state wealth, the space of the Chateau de Bellevue declared her status. The companion piece to the 1751 *Venus* was *The Bath of Venus*. Set outside the goddess relaxes on a rock and dips a toe into the pond below. She is surrounded by white doves and a single wisp of fabric as privacy. Her body seems to have been modeled after an "academie de femme" study Boucher produced years prior from a live model. The companion piece *The Bath of Venus* forgoes the heavy objects in favor of the lightness of an outdoor scene. As *The Bath of Venus* is an idyllic outdoor scene, it is possible Boucher desired to pair it with an luxurious indoor setting.<sup>22</sup> The intention is clear, but what is the purpose?<sup>23</sup> The answer may lie in how the eye takes in visual information, and how the *The Toilette of Venus* straddles the line between familiar and fantasy.

## 5. How We See Her: Twentieth-century Visual Theory

In the twentieth-century scientists and psychologists began to further study the function of the human eye and how anatomy affects intake of visual information. Gestalt principals, as put forth in the 1920s by Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Kohler, propose that the entity is greater than the sum of its parts. This is because the human brain automatically draws together groupings of similar objects, which can be based on past experience. A common word

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<sup>22</sup> Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation," *Representations* 73, no. 1 (2001): pp. 54-88, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2001.73.1.54>.

<sup>23</sup> Katharine Baetjer, *French Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: from the Early Eighteenth Century through the Revolution* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2019).

partially covered is still legible because we are aware of the grouping based on familiar grouping of lines. In *The Toilette of Venus* the attributed objects are related in the viewer's mind based on past experience – the connection to Venus.

Ernst Gombrich, an Austrian art historian working in England, drew on earlier Gestalt psychology to focus in on how the eye views art and ornament. While Gestalt theory explains how the viewer groups objects together, Gombrich's *breakfinder* explains how we differentiate them. In *The Sense of Order: A study in the psychology of decorative art* (1979), Gombrich proposed that there is a limit to the amount of visual information the eye can take in and process at any given moment. That limit depends on the foveal area, the small visual field an eye can interpret clearly in sharp definition.<sup>24</sup> Outside of this small area vision begins to lose focus and blur. The eye must then choose where to look.<sup>25</sup> The *breakfinder* is Gombrich's proposed response to the brain's overstimulation through the onslaught of constant information. Instead of looking at the overall design, the *breakfinder* looks for breaks in the design as the source of new information. In a familiar setting the *breakfinder* would use Gestalt principles of grouping to only alert to anomalies.

On the surface, Boucher's *The Toilette of Venus* seems entirely composed of "similar" objects. Boucher's *The Toilette of Venus* is 42 inches tall, which is approximately 3.5 feet.<sup>26</sup> This means that if the viewer were to stand close enough to discern specific objects, the foveal field would be too small for the eye to absorb and process all the information at one time. Upon further inspection, with information from the Gombrich and Gestalt theory, there are two

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<sup>24</sup> Gombrich theorized that the very middle of the foveal area, the *fovea centralis*, is only one degree wide. Selective focus, or what brain chooses to focus on in crisp detail, is barely wider than the *fovea centralis*. E. H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Phaidon Press, 1979), 118.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 119.

<sup>26</sup> Hedley. *Seductive Visions*. 130.

separate categories of like objects. These objects come from two different contexts, those associated with Greek and Roman mythology and those pulled from the eighteenth-century style turquerie. Both genres were used to construct a sensual fantasy in which the constricting rules of society vanished.

What is interesting to the theorist is not what is similar in the context, but what is different. Boucher did not create any other paintings that combined both turquerie and mythology, nor was it common practice at the time. In order to investigate the impetus behind utilizing two different genres, we will attempt to untangle the knotted layers of symbols and context that Boucher created. We have discussed the painting in terms of mythology, now we may attempt to extract the second layer – turquerie.

## 5. The Erotic Exotic

Even within Boucher's many decadent paintings of Venus, the 1751 *Toilette of Venus* is unique. Compared to Boucher's previous representations of Venus and her attributes, the objects in *Venus* are heavy, metallic, and distinctly stylized. While Venus' associated objects are drawn from antiquity, many of the larger items are portrayed in a distinctly non-French, exotic, aesthetic. Because of this exotic stylization, the bronze incense burner and divan would have been fashionable pieces. To understand the stylization of many of the objects seen in *The Toilette of Venus*, it is crucial to understand the role of turquerie in the eighteenth-century. The style of turquerie was in fashion from 1650 to the latter half of the eighteenth-century.<sup>27</sup> At the height of

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<sup>27</sup> While a central tenant of this argument is that Turquerie ended in 1750, I argue that while Europe's fascination with Turquerie ended, the French attempt to cling to Turquerie as a status symbol extends until the death of Pompadour. The Franco-Austrian alliance of 1756 is also responsible for the decline in obsession from a negative representation of Ottoman interests. This is seen in direct Turcophobic replacement of Turkish with Chinoiserie.

its popularity the French court was outfitting châteaux in Turkish designs across the country. Devotion of turquerie rose to almost the status of religious and both Boucher and Madame de Pompadour were its proselytes. The trend died as quickly as it caught on, going from fashionable to a representation of the monarchy's excess in a matter of years.

As the area that is now the modern country Turkey was under Ottoman control until 1919, turquerie the term is much broader than the name would suggest. The term turquerie actually referred to the fetishization of a wider area of "exotic" cultures comprising the "Other." This included the Middle East, Chinoiserie, and the Orient.<sup>28</sup> This type of exoticism and fetishization is different than what we would generally understand to be orientalism today. While it would be tempting to explain turquerie through the methodology of Orientalist and post-colonial studies, Edward Said defined the parameters as roughly starting in the late eighteenth century. Orientalism was defined as the corporate institution for dealing with the orient through colonialism.<sup>29</sup>

Perrin Stein, curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, addressed the fraught topic for eighteenth-century scholars. Perrin explained, "Orientalism, for Said, is by definition closely linked to colonialist activities and mentalities. He is primarily interested in modern Orientalism, which he defines as beginning in 1798 with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt; In fact, Rococo exoticism differs dramatically from later Orientalism not only aesthetically but also, and perhaps more significantly, in terms of its determining mentality, growing out of a distinct set of historical circumstances."<sup>30</sup> She recommends that eighteenth-century scholars, many of whom

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(Edhem Eldem, "FRENCH TRADE AND COMMERCIAL POLICY IN THE LEVANT IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY." *Oriente Moderno* 18 (79), no. 1 (1999): 30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25817589>.

<sup>28</sup> Stein. "Costume Turc." 416.

<sup>29</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Perrin Stein, "Amédée Van Loo's Costume Turc: The French Sultana." *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 3 (1996): 417–38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3046193>.

have struggled with this definition of orientalism, not fully oppose Said's definition in regards to the eighteenth-century, but present a caveat to everything prior to Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt. Stein argues that the expression of the colonial relationship between European and non-European nations represent one level of interpretation for images which speak to a broader range of national tensions and conflicts.<sup>31</sup> While turquerie does not fall within this timeframe, nor does it coexist with colonialism, much of Said's work is nevertheless useful in understanding the concept of the Orient. As Said stated, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories, and landscapes, remarkable experiences."<sup>32</sup>

Turquerie was more concerned with the appropriation of cultural imagery on a personal level rather than the systemic Orientalism that Said proposes post-colonization.<sup>33</sup> The symbols of the other, ripped from their natural context, were used by the French elite to craft the image of exoticism that had nothing to do with their cultural origin. Ottoman cultural provided a new language to identify objects of leisure, luxury, and projection of fantasy. This appropriated vocabulary was used to impose sensuality on the female body by association with objects coded in turquerie.<sup>34</sup> Turquerie played freely with mixing and matching exotic goods, both in art and space without concern for the cultural meaning.<sup>35</sup> Internal action taken by the Sultanate to improve the public image of the empire reduced fear of the Ottomans, transforming association with the Middle East from warrior tribes to producers of elegant goods and submissive women<sup>36</sup> The style was not born from exoticism alone, but the cultural response to the increased Ottoman

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 417.

<sup>32</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Bevilacqua, and Helen Pfeifer. "TURQUERIE: CULTURE IN MOTION, 1650–1750." *Past & Present*, no. 221 (2013): 75–118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24543612>. 77.

<sup>34</sup> Bevilacqua and Pfeifer. "TURQUERIE: CULTURE IN MOTION, 1650–1750." 76.

<sup>35</sup> Stein. "Costume Turc." 417.

<sup>36</sup> Bevilacqua and Pfeifer. "TURQUERIE: CULTURE IN MOTION, 1650–1750." 79.

trade and movement of goods and ideas into France. This trade was a point of pride for the wealthy French, so rather than a cultural experience through appropriation they were trying to obtain a commercial one.

While Pompadour commissioned the Venuses from Boucher she was outfitting her bedchamber *à la turq* and decorating a cabinet de Chinoiserie.<sup>37</sup> It is clear that to the French Chinoiserie and turquerie were not considered separate but as styles that could be interlaced without concern for cultural disruption.

Both spaces were decorated with intermixed imported and French-made products designed to look foreign — with no regard for the ‘authenticity’ of either. Both faux and real were desired equally for their connection to the fantasy of the Other. This was the height of turquerie, and perhaps its last dying breath. By the 1770s the tides had shifted, and the critics began to note how absurd the style was. As written in the *Coup d’Oeil sur le Sallon de 1775* “The French, on the other hand, have the odd habit of turning the whole universe French. Look at these paintings by m. vanloo which represent a seraglio where the beauties are surely not coiffed in the Turkish style. This pleases at first glance but is the second as favorable?”<sup>38</sup> By the time Van Loo’s *la turquerie* was exhibited in 1775 the genre had fallen out of fashion. After Pompadour’s death in 1764 and Louis XVI accession to the throne in 1774, there was an intentional distancing from Pompadour’s visual canon. Turquerie and this style of Orientalism was then associated with the excess of the *ancien regime*. Ultimately the excessive spending and wealth represented by this style, and the Rococo as a whole, was also one of the reasons for the downfall of the French monarchy.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Biver, *La Histoire*, 60.

<sup>38</sup> *Coup d’oeil sur le Sallon de 1775, park under aveugle*, Paris, 1775, Deloynes Collection, x, no. 162. In Stein. “Le Costume Turc.” 435.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 438.

With the expansion of French colonization under Napoleon I, the French cultural attitude moved away from the non-specific generalized exoticism that drew from the Turks and Ottomans as a place of fantasy, and towards embracing the projection of specific identities and stereotypes onto the other.

## 5.2 Foreign Scents

In *Venus turquerie* acts as a modifier of the scene, a layer on top of the pre-set code of mythology. The impact of turquerie can be seen clearly in *The Toilette of Venus*, created just before the crest of the movement's popularity. Venus lies on a sloping couch or divan. The rich fabrics surrounding her would have been imported through Ottoman trade agreements. The intricate mirror, and metal objects. These objects take on one of the primary appeal of turquerie, sanctioning luxury by masking consumption as a collecting culture.<sup>40</sup> Yet they do not proclaim foreignness as overtly as the large incense burner near Venus' outstretched foot. The incense burner also indulges a sense of turquerie, yet its true visual inspiration lies elsewhere.

Katie Scott in *The Interior Politics of Mme de Pompadour* writes: "The exotic, upholstered realm of oneiric retirement that constituted the harem, according to the West, recreated imaginatively at Bellevue with 'tapestries' of layered Chinese silk and gauze." Additionally the room was decorated with lacquered furniture and paintings of Pompadour in Turkish dress. Scott also locates elements of Chinoiserie in the bath and theatre, describing their utilization with turquerie as the "same language of decoration."<sup>41</sup>

The incense burner, or censer, sits in the bottom right of Boucher's painting. The shiny bronze surface reflects ambient light as scented smoke spills from its round vents. The censer in

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<sup>40</sup> Bevilacqua and Pfeifer. "TURQUERIE: CULTURE IN MOTION, 1650-1750." 76.

<sup>41</sup> Scott, "Interior Politics," 269.

*Venus* is a tripod with three cloven hooves for feet. The body features a lattice design with flowers in the negative space, framed by an ornamental shape reminiscent of acanthus leaves. The object is remarkable both visually and because it is one of the only incense burners Boucher painted. None of Boucher's other Venus paintings include an incense burner. The only other painting Boucher completed with a large censer is the *Blonde Odalisque* 1752– a painting of an Ottoman concubine. In both paintings the style of the censer does not conform with any particular culture, especially not French.

French *brûle-parfum*, from the mid eighteenth-century were typically ceramic, not metal. *Incense Burner (brûle-parfum)* held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a typical French standing incense burner (fig. 7).<sup>42</sup> Attenuated ceramic legs hold a shallow round basin over a *réchaud* or smaller burner. *Pastilles*, traditional wax incense, used to produce a smokeless perfume. Metal incense burners were used for religious ceremonies but were usually hung from long chains so that the scent could sweep over a congregation, the style also most commonly seen in the Middle East. The censer in *Venus* both functions and looks differently than the object displayed in the Metropolitan Museum.

Boucher published a collection of designs and prints for decorative objects titled *Livre de Vases* (1741-1772). Plate 2 (fig. 8) depicts a vase design that has been identified by art historians as most likely representing a censer due to the religious iconography.<sup>43</sup> The incense burner features a light ceramic body with religious iconography painted onto the side. Boucher's designs for French censers do not reflect the squat, metal object in *Venus*.

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<sup>42</sup> Incense Burner (Brûle-Parfum), woodwork, French, ca. 1775, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/207392>.

<sup>43</sup> Alicia M. Priore, "François Boucher's Designs for Vases and Mounts," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 3, no. 2 (1996): 2–51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40662567>.

The censer in *Venus* is far more reminiscent of Chinese incense burners from the same period. A similar item is the *Tripod Censer with Chi-Dragon Handles* from the seventeenth-century, currently at the Saint Louis Art Museum (fig. 9). The shape recalls the shape and design of vessels from the 7<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> century, even though they are from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup> This is perhaps why the censer depicted in *Venus* has a shape more associated with much older design, as seen in the *Incense Burner* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, from the 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 10).<sup>45</sup> The body draws from ancient Chinese form of the Ding, characterized by its round body and tripod legs.

The *Venus* censer and the example from the Qing dynasty share many qualities. The smoke for both censers is released from distinct vents in the lid. Both have heavy bronze bodies that curve under, bodies featuring ornate carvings and cut outs, and have the springy zoomorphic feet characteristic of Chinese bronze work. Chinese artists had mastered the position of vents and smoke to create a pleasing visual and olfactory experience. The vents in *Venus* release wisps of white smoke, proving that this is not a *pastille* French incense. To the French viewers both the foreignness and the capture of scent would have been clues to the eroticism of the location.

Some aspects have been changed from the popular Chinese styles. Instead of a foo dog or dragon the lid resembles a military helmet, topped with feather pomp. This could potentially be to distance Pompadour from the Confucian association. Most Qing dynasty bronze work was detailed with intricate filigree and cut outs while the censer in *Venus* is simplified with only circular cut outs and lattice body. Clearly this censer has been stripped of some of the original

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<sup>44</sup> Tripod Censer with Chi-Dragon Handles and Lion-Dog Knob on Openwork Cover, Qing dynasty, bronze, Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis. <https://www.slam.org/collection/objects/43367/>.

<sup>45</sup> Incense Burner, Tang Dynasty, gilt bronze, metalwork, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/61221>.

Chinese ornament. There are no remaining bronze censers — Chinese, Turkish, or French — in available digitized collections that match the particular style seen in *Venus*.<sup>46</sup> There are Turkish censers from this period, but they are reserved for religious ceremonies and are delicate and typically smaller than this one.

More information comes from Boucher's *Blonde Odalisque* 1752, which also features a heavy bronze censer with zoomorphic tripod legs. However, the censer in this painting features a foo dog handle, making the piece definitively Chinese and not Turkish. Yet the lion claw foot legs are not common in Chinese censers, nor is it typical to find acanthus leaf patterns on Asian burners. Followers of *turquerie* saw no issue in freely mixing designs from various cultures. While Boucher was known for drawing objects he owned, and he collected *Chinoiserie*, it follows that this particular burner may not have existed. Instead, Boucher created a compilation of Chinese and Ottoman styles, layering an exotic language onto a piece already rooted in the fantasy of the Far East.

Boucher wanted this object to be noticed. Even in this simplified style the censer is still the most detailed object in the composition. While the general style of Boucher's brush strokes for the fabric and even other metal ornaments are broad and thick, Boucher paints the censer in the same manner as *Venus*' face. The whole body is in sharp focus with precise reflections highlighting the metal curves. While other ornamental objects are partially hidden, on their sides, or behind something, the censer is upright and unobscured. While the other objects serve a purpose to which ornament is secondary — the ewer can always hold liquid independent of decoration — the censer only serves an ornamental purpose, to fragrance the air. Incense, while

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<sup>46</sup> Based on a brief survey conducted through image matching search of the digital archives of the top collections of Qing bronze or copper censers, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Saint Louis Art Museum, Sotheby's, Bonham's, Christies, and the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum in Turkey.

sometimes associated with religious connotations, in the toilette serves the sole purpose of ornamenting the air. The style now fits a Turkish setting without abandoning its Chinese association but creates a disconnect between these two layers. It is not one or the other but both and pulls together the two layers of turquerie and myth into a single object. This combination presents an object that only exists in the fantasy of Venus.

These objects in Venus' toilette seen outside of this composition in the interior setting all carry this additional layer of fantasy by taking on elements of foreign style or fantastical form, some even losing functionality to the priority of exotic lust. These objects are both attributes and signifiers of the exotic. The gold mirror, while a symbol of Venus and facing away from us, features a carved floral pattern wrapped around its frame. The ewer, carrying water as the goddess's origin, has frilled trim and elaborate handle. A functional platter does not need to take on any extra shape, yet the one at Venus' feet takes the form of silver shell- also telling of the sea. The putti play with strands of pearls, routinely imported from India and China through regulated private trade, both marking Venus and turquerie.<sup>47</sup> Venus is also connected with sweet smells, such as incense. The incense burner features in many mythological works produced in the same period Boucher was working as well as visually recalling Chinese styles. The incorporation of so many decadent decorative pieces and luxurious silk brocade announces absolute opulence. Beyond announcing Pompadour's wealth, presumably understood by the château itself, these objects connect the central figure to the concept of fantasy through turquerie and mythos.

Paired with mythology Boucher's use of turquerie in this painting served to access the fantasy world offered by the generalized exotic. Venus' mythological attributes are coated in layers of Otherness. Turquerie was not only popular in Pompadour's court, it also allowed

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<sup>47</sup> Earl H. Pritchard, "Private Trade between England and China in the Eighteenth Century (1680-1833)." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 1, no. 1 (1957): 108-37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3596041>. 124.

Boucher access to multiple other cultures beyond Ottoman. Orientalism in the form of turquerie included appropriated aspects of Chinoiserie and broadly Asian styles combined indiscriminately, as seen in Venus' incense censer. Mythology and turquerie both offered an association that Boucher desired, that of fantasy.

## 6. Space and Context

All of Boucher's twenty-nine paintings of Venus are set outside. The only partial interiors are the four toilettes of Venus. The other three feature curtains on one side only. *The Toilette of Venus* is the only mythological painting that has curtains on both sides, indicating that the setting is an interior with a window to the exterior. Context as well as content matters with determining similar visual strands of objects, Both the context to which the objects would be found, and the space they were in.

*The Toilette of Venus* was commissioned by Madame de Pompadour for her recently construction residence, the Chateau de Bellevue. Situated just outside Paris the chateau was placed on the road to Versailles, both showing the wealth of the king and providing easy access.

The Chateau de Bellevue fell into disrepair following Louis XVI's ascension and was destroyed following Napoleon's occupation. Leaving only two walls standing, it is difficult to ascertain the exact design of the interior. French art historian Paul Biver produced a comprehensive description and plan of the Château de Bellevue from the Archive Nationales de France and recovered letters (fig. 11). According to building plans, public records, and archives, Boucher's painting would have actually been found in the bathing suites. The *salles de bains*, as

noted on the layout of Bellevue from the first architectural plan 1748, can be traced to the ground floor of an outer building.<sup>48</sup>

The rooms were constructed across the from a theater main building, lining the pathway to the main residence. These buildings acted as a prologue to the main house, alerting the visitor to expect drama and staging within. In later renovations further rooms and corridors would extend to encompass the bathing suites, but they still remained separated from the main house.<sup>49</sup> Biver reports that the *The Bath of Venus* was hung above the door leading to the pièce des bains, next to *The Toilette of Venus* above the door to the cabinet de commodité on the right. The overdoor was a place of prestige.

A contemporary account of Bellevue in a letter from 1755 by Antoine-Nicolas Dézallier d'Argenville describes the location, "The bathing rooms, situated at the right of the château's courtyard, contain two works by the same painter, *Venus at her Bath* and *Venus at her Toilette attended by Cupids*."<sup>50</sup> The *Toilette of Venus* was then not intended for display in the toilette, a public space, but the salle de bains, a prized space of sensual knowledge. The painting was not randomly assigned this location but commissioned for it.

Biver notes that the chambre des bains were decorated by Madame de Pompadour in a very original fashion.<sup>51</sup> According to a 1763 inventory the room was upholstered with fine cotton, striped *cordonnet* and chenille, and appliqués with silk Chinese figures. A marble fireplace was

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<sup>48</sup> Biver. *Histoire Du Château De Bellevue*. Mamers: Impr.-libr. Gabriel Enault, 1933.

The Metropolitan Museum of art references the painting as designed for a three-room series of bathing suites, while the title of the painting refers to a toilette.

<sup>49</sup> Biver. *Histoire Du Château De Bellevue*. 68.

<sup>50</sup> "L'Appartement des bains, placé sur la droite dans la cour du Château, renferme deux ouvrages du même Peintre; Vénus dans le bain, & Vénus à sa toilette servie par les Amours" National Gallery of art, *Voyages pittoresque des environs de Paris ou descripton des maisons royales* (Paris, 1755), 29.

<sup>51</sup> "Le Chambre des Bains a été décorée par Madame de Pompadour d'une façon très original." Biver. *Histoire de Du Château De Bellevue*. 68.

decorated with volute, rocaille, and trumeau mirrors.<sup>52</sup> The archive notes Persian cut-outs of a lion and peacock decouped onto a frame, and furniture consisting of a tapestry, a bed, two armchairs, four chairs, a screen, an armchair *en bergère* and two curtains of windows.<sup>53</sup> The wood trim was painted with green varnish to offset the red bouquets of flowers and butterflies. Instead of a traditional wall with sharp corners, the room was transformed into soft, luxurious, touchable surface. The day bed was draped with fabric matching the windows – cotton printed with flowers and butterflies. As Scott notes, “the *Toilette of Venus* depicts the interior it decorates,” with lush fabric surrounding a space of comfort and luxury.<sup>54</sup>

In the next room, passing under the Venus the visitor enters a space of further bodily knowledge - the *baignoire*. Copper bathtubs were placed in gold leafed niches surrounded with a fabric canopy. Gilded taps produced hot water from a boiler just out of sight.

The *Toilette of Venus* was intended for a particular place, to elicit a particular feeling. As rooms in the country home grew space became more specialized. Delineating space was very important in French society. The spatial context and preparation for the most mundane activities was carefully calculated to present a perfectly manicured image. As wealth multiplied in the aristocracy, the rooms of the château followed.<sup>55</sup> The name of the spaces and uses changed often as residences expanded over time. With each renovation of a residence new rooms were added, and spaces took on highly specialized functions that necessitated careful maneuvering in society.<sup>56</sup> What on early plans is seen as a simply “cabinet” obtained specific usage in the mid

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<sup>52</sup> Biver. *Histoire Du Château De Bellevue*. 67.

<sup>53</sup> “Un Meuble de découpures de Perse reportées sur une toile de coton fine lizerée et profilée de cordonnet et de chenille, consistant en une Tapisserie, un Lit, deux fauteuils, quatre chaises, un Ecran, un fauteuil en Bergère et deux Rideaux de fenêtres” Biver, *Le Histoire de Bellevue*. 69.

<sup>54</sup> Scott, “Interior Politics,” 267.

<sup>55</sup> While the amount of wealth did increase for certain families, many in French society were destitute. However, they continued to build and renovate to keep pace with fashion.

<sup>56</sup> Lilley. “The Name of the Boudoir.” 194.

1700's. First the toilette, a space of primping with an aristocratic audience, then a specific bathing suite, and finally the boudoir.

The painting's title *The Toilette of Venus* implies that the setting should be in a toilette, or involving the action of the toilette. In the simplest sense, the physical space of the toilette was a room for applying make up. Unlike now, the act of making up oneself was not seen as requiring privacy - in French aristocratic society it was yet another ritual to display social status. The toilette was no longer just the table, but act of maquillage and the performance of making up.<sup>57</sup> The public ritual of the toilette in the mid eighteenth-century encompassed both the woman and the attendees in a display of wealth and proximity to status.<sup>58</sup> Madame de Pompadour participated in the custom of the public toilette and dressing act, expecting those in her inner circle to attend as well as entertain her during the extended act.

In the portrait *Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour* by François Boucher 1750 (Fig. 3) the marquise sits at a mirror, primed with rouge brush raised to her pale cheeks - signaling the importance of maquillage to the culture and Pompadour's status.<sup>59</sup> Pompadour sits upright in a western style chair, posed at a small desk with mirror. Pompadour was a master of making up a role, both in maquillage at the toilette, and in the made-up persona that allowed her to control her reception at court. Indeed, specific pieces of furniture were associated with both the space and the act.

Despite the title *Toilette of Venus* does not appear to portray a traditional toilette scene like *Marquise de Pompadour*. *The Toilette of Venus* lacks the upright seating and table

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<sup>57</sup> Hyde, 'Make up.' 145.

<sup>58</sup> Jane Adlin. "Vanities: Art of the Dressing Table." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 71, no. 2 (2013): 1–48. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43824748>, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Melissa Hyde. "The 'Makeup' of the Marquise: Boucher's Portrait of Pompadour at Her Toilette." *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 3 (2000): 453–75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3051397>, 453.

associated with the toilette. She does not enact the ritual of donning courtly dress or rouge, rather lounging in a celebration of nudity. There are no spectators that would be expected to attend the toilette, only Venus and her Eroti. This begs the question, if the *Toilette of Venus* does not represent the space of the toilette, where is our Venus to be found?

The painting was located in a space not exactly in *La Piece des Bains*, but the chamber just before. Bathing, a very intimate act, necessitated near or full nudity and the awareness of the body. But in the *salle des bains* she had some amount of privacy. Inspired by exotic bath houses of the ‘orient’, bathing in water was a relatively new phenomenon for the upper echelon of French society. The *salle des bains* had less to do with cleansing than a fantasy of the other. It may be more apt to compare the space to an upscale spa rather than a cleansing bath. We know that the *baignoire* room did have hot water. So instead of being in the bath, where many Venuses would surely be at home, we are instead about to enter one. Her image was permission to enter an even more sensual space, covered in embroidered fabric and glittering with gold. She lived just before the space of bodily knowledge, which acknowledges the possibility and promises release in the foreign fantasy of the bath. She tempted with thoughts of nudity but could not fulfill that urge. *The Toilette of Venus* is clearly intended to be an erotic painting, and we are searching for a context that could be reflective of that genre. This before space, although technically in the *suites des bains*, has the potential for a different identities because of the nature of the expansion of rooms in the château. In the chasm left in the expansion of aristocratic homes, the areas that were “in between” gained identity of their own.

This room is also a space in between, perhaps yet to be titled. The painting was located in a space not exactly in *La Piece des Bains*, but the chamber just before. While titled as a *toilette* there are no attendants beyond Eros, no sign of make up or clothing to be worn. Building plans

list it in the bathing suites, yet it was not in the actual place of bathing. *Venus* lived just before the space of bodily knowledge, which acknowledges the possibility and promises release in the foreign fantasy of the bath. This is also where a woman would dress, and undress. It is a space for lounging, sometimes for sleeping, sometimes for more. But mostly it is luxurious.

Space was clearly important to understanding the context of a painting in the eighteenth century. *The Toilette of Venus* was the only one of Boucher's mythological Venuses who is shown indoors. Even Boucher's other mythological toilette scenes are set partially outside. Space is more important in this indoor scene because it breaks the standard depiction of the genre Boucher had set for himself. This is furthered by the indeterminate identity of Venus' inside space. We have concluded that although the title indicates a toilette, the space does not match the actions of genre of maquillage. It is not a bath like *The Bath of Venus* as the baignoire lays through the doorway. The uncertainty of the setting creates a liminal space of fantasy. The entry room before the *baignoire* had yet to be defined. The space presents the possibility that is embraced in both the painting's setting and the physical location. The setting in *The Toilette of Venus* and the entry room where it hung could find itself as a new space entirely. If Venus is not in the *toilette*, nor the *salle de bain*, perhaps we can locate her in the new space called the *boudoir*.

## 7. Her New Space

The Château de Bellevue and *The Toilette of Venus* were both created concurrently with the evolution of the boudoir. While the concept of the boudoir grew from such spaces as the toilette and bathing suites it did not supersede them. However, the boudoir offered a level of

privacy that the others could not offer. Having a reputation as the vanguard of style, Pompadour would have had access to this new space. She would have also had an impetuous to be one of the first to integrate it into her residence.

The etymology of the term “boudoir” is difficult to trace precisely. Our understanding of this evolution depends on surviving blueprints and buildings, as well as records such as the *Encyclopedié* and other French journals of style. The boudoir as a space evolved from the concept and physical space of the *toilette* and *cabinet*.<sup>60</sup> The term *toilette* derives from a medieval custom of spreading a *toile* or linen cloth over a multipurpose table before performing grooming activities.<sup>61</sup> The first use of the term *boudoir* dates from a 1713 inventory of the Hôtel de Colbert. Previously this space may have been called a *cabinet*, a small room that also carried an expectation of privacy.<sup>62</sup> The evolution from *cabinet* to *boudoir* is closely tied to architectural introduction of the corridor to the country home.<sup>63</sup> Prior to this, rooms could only be accessed linearly, by entering through the previous room. The farther away from the entrance the more intimate use of the space was implied, but there was no true concept of privacy. Corridors allowed each room to be accessed individually. With this innovation wealthy women had access to a private space designed and outfitted just for them.<sup>64</sup> However, while a boudoir is a small cabinet, a small cabinet is not necessarily a boudoir. The cabinet went through a series of transformations from the ‘cabinet de toilette’ or the ‘cabinet avec niche’ to what was finally

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<sup>60</sup> Ed Lilley. “The Name of the Boudoir.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 53, no. 2 (1994): 193–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/990892>, 194.

<sup>61</sup> When dressing, “the table would be draped with a simple cloth that reached the floor, and a second, more refined cloth (probably of linen) or even a piece of leather would be placed on top.” Jane Alden, “Vanities: The Art of the Dressing Table.”

<sup>62</sup> Lilley. “The Name of the Boudoir.” 194.

<sup>63</sup> Alice T. Friedman, “Architecture, Authority, and the Female Gaze: Planning and Representation in the Early Modern Country House,” *Assemblage*, no. 18 (1992): p. 40, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3171205>.

<sup>64</sup> *Encyclopedia* for 1762 included the plans for the Marquise de Villefranche’s château in Avignon and is one of the first examples of a space specifically labeled *boudoir*, but the plans may have been drawn as early as early as 1740. Located off the round *salon*, there is a private entrance from the corridor.

known as the boudoir.”<sup>65</sup> The first *boudoirs* may also have been what Cheng refers to as a *cabinet de retraite*, or lady’s oratory. The oratory was a space for private prayer and devotion, specifically for women.<sup>66</sup> Privacy was only afforded to women in the *salle des bains* and the *boudoir*, perhaps the only spaces within the aristocratic home where a woman’s body was not a performance for an audience.

The 1740 edition of *Dictionnaire de l’Academie Française* offers one of the first published definition of the boudoir as “a small space to which one retires when one wishes to be alone” later in 1752 adding “a small cabinet, very confined, adjacent to the room one normally occupies, apparently thus named because of the habit of retiring there, to sulk (*bouder*) unseen, when one is in a bad mood.”<sup>67</sup> The term carried a both gendered and derogatory connotation, but the space found there was vital. The *Encyclopedia* defined the boudoir as a space for women’s “dress, dozing and devotions” as well as potentially the act of reading.<sup>68</sup> While female ‘zones’ existed prior, the idea of a specific feminine space was radical.

In the boudoir there was a continued performance as in the ritual of the toilette, but this was the performance of relaxation and supposedly letting their guard down. The inaccessibility of the boudoir like the haram created a male fantasy of images and writing on the premise of much-exaggerated female sexuality in the boudoir. The Marquise De Sade wrote on the relation between sex and the space, “How do you explain this small, almost pornographic love legend that has built around the boudoir?”<sup>69</sup> This mix of orientalism, the relaxation of societal

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<sup>65</sup> Mark Girouard, *Life in the French Country House* (London: Cassell, 2001), 149.

<sup>66</sup> Cheng, “The History of the Boudoir in the Eighteenth Century.” 30.

<sup>67</sup> Michel Delon, “Boudoir,” in *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* (Chicago, IL: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), p. 192..

<sup>68</sup> Lilley. “The Name of the Boudoir.” 194.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 195.

expectations and rules, and the mysterious nature of solely feminine space created a sexual connotation of the boudoir that has lasted to modern day.

Unlike the other spaces, the function of the boudoir was not static. The definition itself allowed for the space to remain unspecific and therefore mysterious. Both then and now the mystery of the boudoir is cause for both intrigue and concern. It seems men became obsessed with the idea of what could go on in any feminine space, where they supposedly were not allowed. The boudoir was also seen as an inherently sexual place due to the enforced privacy and expectancy of bodily knowledge. It assumed a woman's inevitable need for privacy owing to her emotional and volatile nature, not a person's need for self-reflection. A space of emotional feeling eventually becomes a space for physical feeling.

It seems that during this early period the term boudoir could apply to many spaces, not just those built for such purposes. Diana Cheng in *The History of the Boudoir in the Eighteenth Century* points out that this discrepancy, "The blurred boundary between the imaginary and the physical boudoir," is characteristic of the space itself.<sup>70</sup> These private spaces for bodily connection and sensuality eventually formed a new space called the *boudoir*. Even though they were growing in style, and this was the home of the most stylish woman in France, there is no boudoir space listed in the renovated Bellevue plan from 1773.<sup>71</sup> As both Pompadour and her successor Madame Du Berry were known to start trends, it is unlikely that this implies they were simply behind the times. It is, however, quite possible that the space occupied by *The Toilette of Venus* fulfilled the needs of a boudoir. There was no need to add an additional space labeled

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<sup>70</sup> Cheng, "The History of the Boudoir," 15.

<sup>71</sup> The term boudoir was used in the letter dating 3-10-1753 describing a lacquered piece intended for the boudoir or back offices, which appear to be a Chinoiserie themed room that does not meet the privacy required to meet the later definition of boudoir. Otherwise there is no mention of a boudoir intended for privacy or sexual intimacy in Bellevue. See Biver, *Le Histoire de Bellevue*, 128.

boudoir if one already existed. If the items in the painting reflect boudoir style, yet are still referred to as a *toilette*, then it is conceivable that the real space at Château de Bellevue may have been an early boudoir as well. When Bellevue was constructed, the boudoir was not yet a fully realized space. Therefore it is possible that what I have described as a toilette at Bellevue may more accurately be described as a proto-boudoir; a space in the bathing suites as identified by its proximity to bodily knowledge, female audience, and expectation of privacy.

### 7.1 The Exoticism of the Boudoir

The boudoir was enmeshed with fantasies of the ‘exotic’ — particularly Turkish designs or turquerie. The physical space was often filled with themed furniture and accessories liberally appropriated from Ottoman traded goods. Furniture in the toilette often included the dressing table and mirror, as well as seats for reclining. Unlike a toilette, a typical boudoir featured a sofa, divan, Turkish couch, *lit à la Turk* not to mention decorative items intended to seem as if they were picked up at a bazaar.<sup>72</sup> The Turkish couch, divan, and sofas featured reclined backs, padded arms, and sloping seats. It was more appropriate to recline in the *boudoir* than sit upright. Horace Walpole, a man not known to be strait laced, wrote that the state of being at ease on a sofa was like “lolling in a *pêché-mortel* [mortal sin].”<sup>73</sup> It was not unintentional that these sofas also functioned as beds. The *lit de Turk* was by definition, a bed. We also know that there was a *lit* in the room described by Biver.

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<sup>72</sup> Gülen Çevik, “Boudoirs and Harems: The Seductive Power of Sofas,” *Journal of Interior Design* 43, no. 3 (2018): pp. 25-41, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joid.12122>. 33.

<sup>73</sup> Horace Walpole, J. Wright, and George Agar-Ellis Dover, *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford: Including Numerous Letters Now First Published from the Original Manuscripts* (London: R. Bentley, 1846). 308-309.

The room setting in *Venus* is outfitted in all orientalized goods. She sits on a sloping divan, feet resting on an ottoman. The sumptuous fabrics around Venus would also be imported from a colony. To the modern-day viewer this style would read as antique, but for the eighteenth-century visitor these items were the height of contemporary décor. As such they were not surprising in Pompadour's private suits. The painting reflects the setting to such an extent that it seems as though the imaginary toilette is simply an extension of the real space. Venus in classical myth was the goddess of love and femininity. The close association between Middle Eastern and oriental aesthetics with the concept of the harem and the dissolution of sexual inhibition indicates this space as it was conceived in the mid eighteenth-century was a specifically gendered location, one of the first of its kind due to the changing designs and tastes seen in French châteaux. The eighteenth-century reinvention of the Ottoman harem as an aristocrat's boudoir allowed the French to inhabit an exotic domain, away from the expectations of the court, while maintaining a safe distance from the actual unknown.<sup>74</sup> The term *boudoir* implied a gendered space for women to escape to, but it also a space in which gendered expectations were acted out under the guise of women's liberation.

It is conceivable that the Bellevue residence included the first notions of the boudoir. The concept of the boudoir as an official designation was popularized in part due to Mme Pompadour's influence.<sup>75</sup> This would mean that instead of Venus' intended placement as in a public area, we see her in a private experience. If the setting was designed to reflect the design of

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<sup>74</sup> Çevik. "Boudoirs and Harems." 25.

<sup>75</sup> "Since the construction projects at the Trianon and other retreats were instigated by Madame de Pompadour's desire to build places of entertainment for the King, the addition of "boudoirs" to the 1758 Grand Prix program most likely was a reference to her." Cheng. *The History of the Boudoir*. 83.

Pompadour had installed her own brother as head architect before the architectural summit where France debuted the official term boudoir as a technical word for the space. This association was not by mistake, as the term was considered ambitiously sexual and a nod to her bodily autonomy.

the interior, and that interior was a boudoir, Gombrich's principles would fully explain why the painting draws our eye to Venus.

## 8. Boucher's Odalisques

Boucher's *Venus* merges turquerie and myth through the genre she inhabits. Along with the central figure's identity of mythical Venus she also inhabits sexuality as an Odalisque. While attributes connect her to mythology, the interior offers another insight into the use of turquerie in this image. Pompadour outfitted her private space with rich textiles, incense in bronze censers, thick rugs, and ornate furniture were imported to sensorially, olfactorily, and visually transport the viewer away from court and continental expectations to a fantasy land. Upright sitting and formal rooms were replaced by lounging *à la turq* in private. The comparison to Boucher's odalisques and other Boudoir settings offers the possibility that *Venus* could fit neatly into another genre – that of the odalisque.

The Odalisque is a genre of painting depicting the female nude as a concubine in a Sultan's harem.<sup>76</sup> Under suspended disbelief, any woman could fulfill the role of Odalisque. The Odalisque is characterized by a reclined nude, in the role of the concubine, in repose on a sofa or bed. She is typically in the lush setting of the harem, surrounded by exotic textiles as blankets and drapes. Common accessories were incense burners, jewels, and elaborate furniture. The most famous example of the genre comes in 1814 with Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *L'Odalisque à l'escalve*. The concubine here reclines on lush blue *lit de turq*, while an ornate censer and opium pipe sit at her feet. Thick silk drapes upholster the walls behind her.

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<sup>76</sup> Gülen. "Boudoirs and harems." 21.

Boucher painted a series of Odalisques in his career and incorporated references to the theme in previous paintings. While Pompadour would have never put herself in the place of a sex slave, Boucher clearly draws from the genre through pose, symbol, and setting for *Venus*. An Odalisque was exclusively shown in the same space that inspired the boudoir – a harem.<sup>77</sup> As Stein argues for *Le Costume Turc*, the symbols of the harem are less to create an exact association, but to project a guise or layer of ambience - typically for a goal.<sup>78</sup>

His representation of King Louis XV's lesser mistress in *Blonde Odalisque (Munich Version)* of 1752 is an example of Boucher's treatment of the female form as an object. The title may have been enough to signal this woman's role as an exotic sex object, but Boucher does not hold back in providing the viewer with excessive details that indicate this is an acceptable body to lust over. Her form is literally on display, sprawled out on a gilded divan, dark fabric emphasizing the pale pink flesh Boucher was known for. She does not look at the viewer but straight ahead. All of her body is displayed to be taken in.<sup>79</sup> Next to her is an incense censer, the same rounded bronze body found in *Venus*, floor pillow, and rose. In this period any nude at all reclined on a sofa or lit in an exotic space with nods to a Turkish harem should be evaluated as possible odalisque, including Pompadour's *Venus*.

*The Toilette of Venus* presents the viewer with a very different type of nude, evident through the difference in posture. In contrast with the relaxed, playful *Odalisque*, Venus is controlled and upright, almost rigid in the positioning of her arms and neck. Her modesty is preserved by the sheer fabric pooled in her lap and the dove tucked to her breast. While *Odalisque* is open and vulnerable, Venus is closed off and guarded. Yet she is surrounded by the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 22.

<sup>78</sup> Stein, *The French Sultana*, 438.

<sup>79</sup> Cheryl Herr, "The Erotics of Irishness," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990): pp. 1-34, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448571>, 12.

same objects as the odalisques. If, as other scholars have argued, the central figure of Venus is a reference to Pompadour's lasting sexuality, the representation of an odalisque in a private space would make sense. In *Venus* Boucher presents an erotic fantasy, yet the titillating centerpiece is absent. She serves a very different purpose as the center of the piece than Boucher's typical nude

While the aristocracy like Pompadour with excessive wealth – or in an attempt to prove they were not insolvent - were gleefully participating in the appropriation of imagery and ritual from the “exotic” the genesis of these fantasies did not matter to the development of the faux-rituals. For example, in Pompadour's proto-boudoir space the fabric draped on the walls was Indian, embroidered with Chinese figures, draped over a Turkish bath, the air perfumed with incense. Bathing in water was practically unheard of until the aristocracy took on the ritual without consideration for the culture. As Stein argues for *Le Costume Turc*, the symbols of the harem are less to create an exact association, but to project a guise or layer of ambience - typically for a goal.<sup>80</sup> When Louis XVI came to power in 1775 he exiled the last mistress and effectively ended the style of turquerie. Orientalism and exoticism would of course live on, experiencing an enormous boost in popularity during the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the colonization of the Middle East under Napoleon. But the relatively short-lived style that seems to have stuffed multiple exotics into one term, was condemned even before the French Revolution.

## 9. Conclusion

Boucher aimed to push the envelope of both portraiture and fantasy, but not moral realism that the critics seemed to favor. As the art world edged towards the stark realism of Neo-

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<sup>80</sup> Stein, *The French Sultana*, 438.

classicism, Boucher pulled further away into erotic fantasy. Madame de Pompadour, Boucher's most fervent supporter, passed away from chronic health issues in 1764 at just 48 years old. François Boucher would follow in 1770. Unlike younger artists like Boucher's student Jean-Honoré Fragonard, neither would see the wreckage of the French Revolution and the abolition of the monarchy. Yet, their combined love of turquerie and fetishization of the exotic provided some of the perpetuating factors in the revolt. Paintings like *The Toilette of Venus* and the enormous country estates of the aristocracy were used as an example of the absurd wealth held by a select few in the *ancien régime*. The rococo style, as Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated, "contributed little to public virtue."<sup>81</sup>

Upon first glance *The Toilette of Venus* appears to be in a setting appropriate to its mythological origin. But when observed under visual theory, it is evident that something new is happening. This is an unusual image that could only come from Pompadour, a trendsetter with an unlimited budget and an artist like Boucher, who displayed a penchant for nudes and a drive for the erotic. Boucher layered two sensual fantasy genres to create the ultimate escapist fantasy, only appropriate for Madame de Pompadour's new space of the proto-boudoir. Boucher's *Venus* broke with the canonical representation of a mythological nude. He took layers of both genres and wove them together into a new type of fantasy image.

*The Toilette of Venus* is a painting that has been examined over and over, yet still draws new investigation by art historians. Even those outside of the 18<sup>th</sup> century discipline have found themselves devoted to this work of art. To some *Venus* defines the frivolity and opulence of the eighteenth-century, but Boucher displays subtle innovation that draws the eye to a disconnect

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<sup>81</sup> Richard Rand, "François Boucher, *The Bath of Venus*, 1751," *French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/12200>

between two layers of genre. These different layers become visible only once you attempt to separate the objects in the scene. When analyzed through Gestalt theory of similarities and Gombrich's concepts of the familiar, those connected layers are still visible to the trained eye. Although its parts may be drawn from separate genres, it retains a sense of wholeness. The layers are hidden but the effect is clear. Turquerie and mythology work together to create a seamless scene of amplified sexual desire. By layering two different types of fantasy familiar to the viewer Boucher create the ultimate fantasy image that paralleled the space in which it resided.

His invention worked. To a visitor to the Château de Bellevue in the new boudoir space of the salle de bain, reclining on a *lit*, shrouded in embroidered silk, and awaiting the sensual decadence of submerging one's body in perfumed water, *The Toilette of Venus* fit right into Pompadour's sensual fantasy land. Whether Boucher gave into Pompadour's desires or the other way around, their separate interests were merged into a painting intended specifically to suit the salle des bains at the Château de Bellevue. Pompadour was known to redesign Bellevue often, refurnishing whole wings and replacing paintings with the latest sensation. Boucher's work stayed over the door to the baignoire until Pompadour's death.

Boucher was not afraid to push the boundaries of painted fantasy, as *The Toilette of Venus* is only one example. His obsession with fantasy and Pompadour's love of turquerie led him to use not one but two layers of painted fantasy in pursuit of accessing the utmost seductive fantasy land. This land so far away that the rules of the court no longer applied and one could live out their wildest dreams. Boucher created a world that could never exist for the aristocracy, in between two genres, just past the picture frame. Diderot once wrote of Boucher, "Cet homme a tout — excepté la vérité."<sup>82</sup> Perhaps he was right.

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<sup>82</sup> "This man is capable of everything except the truth." Jo Hedley. *François Boucher: Seductive Visions*. The Wallace Collection, 2004.

Fig. 1 Boucher, François. *The Toilette of Venus*. 1751. Oil on canvas. 42 5/8 x 33 1/2 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435739>



Fig. 2

Boucher, François. *The Triumph of Venus*. 1740. Oil on canvas. 130 x 162 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm. <http://collection.nationalmuseum.se/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=17773&viewType=detailView>.





Fig. 3 Boucher, François. *Pompadour at Her Toilette, Formerly Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour*. 1750. Oil on canvas. 39 5/16 x 33 1/4 in. Fogg Museum, Cambridge. <https://hvr.dartmouth.edu/art/o/303561>.

Fig. 4 Boucher, François. *The Bath of Venus*. 1751. Oil on canvas. 107 x 84.8 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.12200.html>



Fig. 5

Attic red-figure belly Lekythos. Red-figure pottery. C 370 BCE. 15.4 x 7.7 cm. Prussian Cultural Heritage Museum, Berlin. <http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=1017299&viewType=detailView>.



Stiftung  
Preußischer Kulturbesitz

Attisch rotfigurige Bauchlekythos, Ident. Nr.: VI. 4982, 38  
© Foto: Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin  
Fotograf/in: Johannes Laurentius

(cc) BY-NC-SA

Fig. 6

Lotto, Lorenzo. *Venus and Cupid*. 1520. Oil on canvas. 36 3/8 x 43 7/8 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/c> Fig. 8

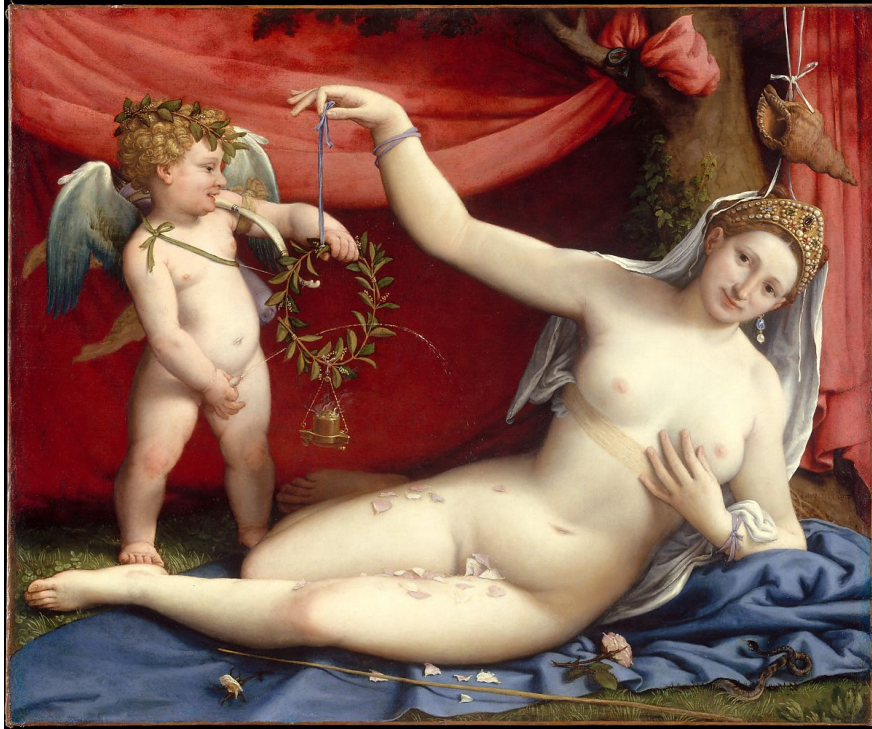


Fig. 7. *Incense Burner (Brûle-Parfum)*. 1775. Woodwork. French. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/207392.ollection/search/436918>.



Fig. 8 Alicia M. Priore, “François Boucher’s Designs for Vases and Mounts,” *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 3, no. 2 (1996): 2–51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40662567>.

Fig. 9  
*Tripod Censer with Chi-Dragon Handles and Lion-Dog Knop on Openwork Cover.* Qing dynasty. Bronze. Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis.  
<https://www.slam.org/collection/objects/43367/>.

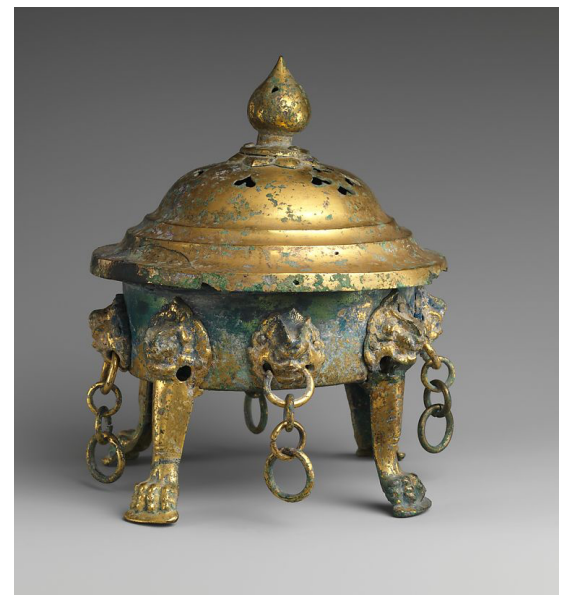




Fig. 10

*Incense Burner*. Tang Dynasty. Gilt bronze. Metalwork. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/61221>.

Fig. 11  
 Biver, Paul. *Château de Bellevue Architectural plans 1749 – 1786*. Histoire Du Château De Bellevue. Mamers: Impr.-libr. Gabriel Enault, 1933. Pp 24.

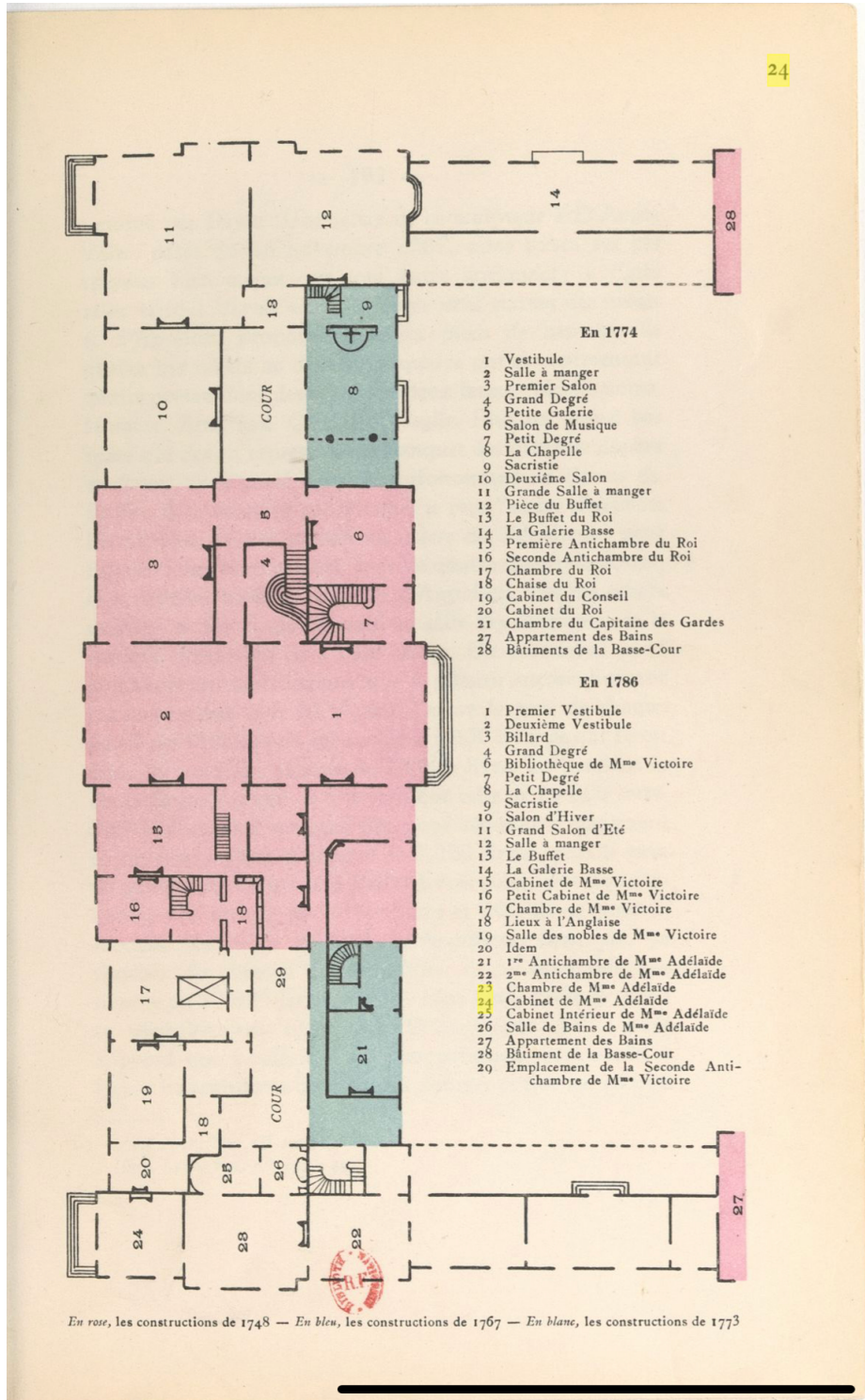




Fig 12  
Boucher, François. *The Blonde Odalisque*, 1752, oil on canvas, unknown dimensions, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

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