



Allegory of the Education of Louis XV, 1756

François Boucher (French, 1703-1770)

Oil on canvas | 25 1/8 x 16 3/4 in. (63.8 x 42.5 cm)

- Why might this painting be painted in monochrome? Could this serve a specific function?

VISUAL ANALYSIS

Allegory of the Education of Louis XV, a painting by François Boucher, is a *grisaille*, or a work composed entirely in shades of black, white, and grey. The

painting shows a young boy, barely visible, set in the lower left center of the scene while two figures, a young woman and a centaur, attend to him. The composition seems to swirl upwards gently, from the two nude female observers in the foreground, to this central grouping of figures, up to a woman in a flowing dress and another figure with wings floating in the sky. Overhead, seven chubby, winged *putti* struggle to string a garland around two empty white orbs. Despite the limited color palette, the painting is detailed and rich, with beautiful shading of musculature and drapery, true to the prevailing style of the time period.

The painting fluctuates in its degree of detail. Some areas, such as the leg of the centaur and the putti, are rendered with a great degree of delicacy. Other areas, primarily the background and non-figural elements, are dashed off in quick, painterly strokes. While in the foreground, Boucher used a wider range of shades and bolder outlines on the figures, which added a visual “weight” to the bottom half of the painting.

FUNCTION/Form & Style

François Boucher was one of the most celebrated painters of the 18th century, equally admired and criticized for his ornate, idyllic paintings. His smaller paintings, often *grisaille* or other monochromes, were often used by Boucher as preliminary or preparatory “sketches” to plan larger compositions for later full-color paintings, or works in different media. *Grisaille* sketches were often made for engravers; usually created very rapidly before the creation of a print. The AMAM’s painting was created as part of a series of engravings depicting scenes from the life of King Louis XV, which would then be made into a set of medallions. Here, Boucher refers to the time period when Louis, age seven, was handed over from his governesses into the care of men, alluding to both the start of his formal education and his ‘coming of age.’ The two empty

- Identify the most important figures in this painting and the visual clues that indicate this.
- What visual clues does Boucher include to indicate that figures from mythology are represented?

circles around which the putti gather were meant for depictions from the front and back of the final medallion design.

Boucher was widely known and admired for his luminous, painterly style characterized by liberal, free brushwork. *Allegory of the Education of Louis XV* is representative of this—though naturalistic, it is painted loosely and is not entirely realistic.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

The story of the sea nymph Thetis presenting her son *Achilles* to his tutor, the centaur Chiron, is used here as an *allegory*. These are the two figures attending to the young boy in the picture; note that Thetis seems to be merging into a stream, and that Chiron's visible leg is clearly that of a horse. Behind and above them are Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, who holds her shield and with a sweeping gesture indicates the scene, and the female personification of Fame,

who holds two trumpets and two wreaths. Paintings using mythology and mythical characters and creatures as allegory were extremely popular in the 18th century.

Louis XV commissioned many of Boucher's works, and he was later appointed the *premier peintre du Roi*—or the King's premier court painter. Also, by the late 1740s, the King's mistress, the Marquise de Pompadour, had become a major patron and collector of Boucher. She commissioned several portraits, as well as paintings of religious scenes and the frivolous, ornate scenes of leisure that would become associated with stylistic movements like *Rococo*. The Royal Family, of course, had enormous influence on culture and the arts, with France at the forefront of determining the new styles of the day.

Boucher's Rococo style was renounced by men like Diderot, Voltaire, and Jacques-Louis David at the end of the century, and provoked great criticism during the

VOCABULARY

Achilles: Legendary Greek hero, and the central character in the *Iliad*, which tells the story of his deeds during the Trojan War. The story of Achilles' education by the centaur Chiron is not included in Homer's tale.

Allegory: A representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another.

Neoclassical: Of, pertaining to, or designating a style of painting and sculpture developed primarily from the mid-18th through mid-19th centuries, characterized chiefly by an iconography derived from classical antiquity, a hierarchical conception of subject matter, severity of composition, and especially in painting, by an oblique lighting of forms in the early phase and a strict linear quality in the later phase of the style.

Putti: A representation of a small, cherubic child, often naked and having wings, used especially in the art of the European Renaissance and afterwards.

Rococo: Noting or pertaining to a style of painting developed simultaneously with the Rococo style in architecture and decoration, characterized chiefly by smallness of scale, delicacy of color, freedom of brushwork, and the selection of playful subjects as thematic material.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Communications: Oral and Visual; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Research
- **Mathematics:** Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes; Measurement
- **Sciences:** Life Sciences; Physical Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities; Economics; Geography; Government; History; People in Societies; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Analyzing and Responding; Connections, Relationships, and Applications; Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection

advent of the French Revolution. Rococo was seen by these critics as decadent and purely decorative, with an emphasis on seemingly superficial and idealized subject matter, and extravagant, expensive materials. Consequently, *Neoclassicism* and history paintings began to take over as the preferred academic style.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

François Boucher was born in 1703 in Paris, and trained with the great painter François Lemoyne, who saw much talent and promise in the young artist. In 1723, Boucher won the prestigious Prix de Rome and then spent five years working with an engraver, Jean-François Cars. During a trip to Italy, he was greatly influenced by the art of the Baroque masters. Upon his return to Paris, he attempted to make a name for himself by securing commissions in the city, mostly of mythological and religious subject matter.

By 1734, he had succeeded in attaining major recognition when he was finally accepted into the Académie Royale, and a year later he received his first royal commission. Many more were to come in following years, including an invitation to create paintings for Louis XV's dining rooms at the Palace at Versailles. Boucher proved to be an incredibly successful and prolific artist with many different talents. Aside from painting, he made designs for tapestries, porcelain, and cabinetry.

In 1765, Boucher was elected the *premier peintre du Roi*, and Director of the Académie Royale, two enormous achievements. However, he began to exhibit less and less at public exhibitions like the Salon because of the increasing critiques of his style and imagery, which were becoming outdated. However, he continued to receive commissions until his death in 1770.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS: Read excerpts from Homer's *Iliad* that relate to the life and exploits of Achilles. Other sources for information on his life include the *Achilleid* and the epic *Cypria*. Write a report summarizing the readings, and speculate about why Louis XV would want to connect himself to these stories. (*Middle and High School*)

SCIENCE: Boucher created many preliminary paintings for future engravings, including this one. Research how the process of engraving works—what kinds of materials and tools are needed? What kinds of metals are easiest to engrave on and why? (*Middle and High School*)

SOCIAL STUDIES: Denis Diderot was a famous late 18th century writer and philosopher, perhaps most known for his *Encyclopédie*. Research his *Encyclopédie*—what was its significance? Why would it have been controversial? Why would Diderot have been opposed to Boucher's artistic style? (*High School*)

VISUAL ARTS: Paint a picture in *grisaille*, or another monochromatic technique. Experiment with making varying shades of grey, and other tones. How does this effect the look and feel of the work? What subjects seem best suited to this technique? (*All Ages*)