

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**François BOUCHER (Paris 1703 - Paris 1770)**

**Study of a Male Nude Holding a Hammer**

Red chalk on light brown paper.

191 x 184 mm. (7 1/2 x 7 1/4 in.)

This is a preparatory study, in reverse, for a figure of a blacksmith in the left background of François Boucher's oval painting of *Venus at the Forge of Vulcan* in the Louvre, dated 1747 and exhibited at the Salon of that year. The painting is noted in a *mémoire* by Boucher as having been commissioned, for the sum of 800 livres, by Charles François Paul Le Normant de Tournehem, Directeur général des bâtiments du roi, for the King's bedchamber at the Château de Marly.

It has been suggested, however, that the *Venus at the Forge of Vulcan* and a pendant painting of *Venus Presenting Aeneas to the Gods* (or *The Apotheosis of Aeneas*), now in the Musée-Promenade de Marly-le-Roi in Louveciennes, may have initially been commissioned in 1746 for the redecorated apartments of the soon to be married Dauphin at Versailles, before the intended destination of the works was changed to Marly. The painting of *Venus at the Forge of Vulcan* is described in the *mémoire* as '4 pieds de long sur 3 et demi de haute représente Vénus qui prie Vulcain de forger des arms pour Enée; ce tableau est compose de huit figures', and in the 1747 Salon livret as 'Un Tableau ovale, representant les Forges de Vulcain. Ce tableau est destine pour la Chambre à coucher du Roy à Marly'. Boucher received the final payment for both works in February 1748. Not long thereafter the composition was adapted and enlarged by the artist in a design for a tapestry to be woven at the Beauvais tapestry works.

Boucher presumably drew the present sheet before he had determined the definitive composition of the painting. Although the figure is reversed in the final painting, and the artist may therefore have used a counterproof of this drawing to reorient the figure, the position of the hands in the drawing is close to that of the right-hand forger in the painting. The present sheet may also have been used for a similar figure in the Beauvais tapestry noted above.

Boucher was particularly fond of the subject of Venus at the Forge of Vulcan, and treated it several times in his career, in paintings, drawings and tapestry cartoons. Taken from Virgil's epic Aeneid, the theme of the goddess visiting Vulcan's forge on Mount Etna to ask her estranged husband to provide arms for her illegitimate mortal son Aeneas, to which he agrees only after her seduction of him, had great appeal for the artist, and undoubtedly for his patrons as well. As Edith Standen has noted of the theme, 'One can only speculate why this particular mythological subject was so popular with Boucher's patrons, including Louis XV. Perhaps the reason was that it provided such a piquant contrast between the soft whiteness of Venus, with her nymphs, cupids, and doves, and the masculinity of Vulcan and his fierce helpers at their noisy and dirty labors. Boucher, in fact, has been quoted as recommending the subject to a pupil whose noble patron had asked for a painting. He said it was "une tâche fort attrayante à remplir: le dessin d'une belle figure de femme environnée d'Amours, la silhouette d'un homme musculeux accompagnée de quelques cyclopes à l'arrière-plan."'

As Françoise Joulie has noted of such drawings as these by Boucher, intended not as academies but as studies for paintings, 'They are perhaps some of the maître's finest drawings, because his knowledge and mastery of anatomical drawing were internalized to give precedence to studies of posture in a composition.'

### **Exhibitions**

New York, Thomas Le Claire Kunsthandel at W. M. Brady & Co., Master Drawings 1500-1900, 1994, no.29.

### **Literature:**

Possibly Alexandre Ananoff and Daniel Wildenstein, *L'opera completa di François Boucher*, Milan, 1980, p.111, under no.313; *The Burlington Magazine*, January 1994, [advertisement]; New York, Sotheby's, *The Line of Beauty: Drawings from the Collection of Howard and Saretta Barnett*, 31 January 2018, p.36, under lot 7.

### **Artist description:**

A pupil of the painter François Lemoyne and the engraver Jean-François Cars, François Boucher's first significant project was producing numerous engravings after drawings by Antoine Watteau for Jean de Jullienne's *Figures de différents caractères... par Antoine Watteau*, also known as the *Recueil Jullienne*. Despite winning the Prix de Rome in 1723, Boucher was unable to take up the scholarship in Italy due to a lack of space at the Académie de France in Rome. He eventually went to Rome at his own expense in 1728, lodging at the Académie de France and returning to Paris around 1731. Received into the Académie Royale in 1734, Boucher soon earned a number of significant commissions. The favourite painter of Louis XV's mistress, the Marquise de Pompadour, Boucher painted decorations for Versailles, Fontainebleau, Marly and elsewhere, as well as several private homes in Paris. He also painted numerous easel pictures – pastoral landscapes, religious and mythological subjects, genre scenes, chinoiseries and portraits – and designed tapestry cartoons for the Gobelins tapestry manufactory, where he succeeded Jean-Baptiste Oudry as surinspector. He also provided designs for Sèvres porcelain and produced a large number of drawings for prints.

In 1765 he was named premier peintre du roi, or First Painter to the King, and also succeeded Carle

Vanloo as director of the Académie. By the end of his career, however, Boucher's style had become somewhat obsolete, and had largely fallen out of favour. Among his pupils were Jean-Baptiste Deshayes and Pierre-Antoine Baudouin – both of whom became his sons-in-law – as well as Jean-Baptiste Le Prince, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Nicolas-Guy Brenet and Gabriel de Saint-Aubin.

A gifted draughtsman, Boucher was as prolific as he was talented, and claimed to have produced ten thousand drawings over a career of some fifty years. One of the leading painters in France between the 1730s and the 1760s, Boucher was also one of the most prolific French draughtsmen of the eighteenth century. As one modern scholar has noted of the artist, 'Every medium served him: pen, pencil, watercolor, chalk, especially his favorite *trois crayons*, bistre wash, india ink, grisaille, and often a combination of several of these. No subject was too lofty or too humble to engage his attention. Whether he drew from life or from his fertile imagination...Boucher's masterly touch is always present, always unmistakeable.'

The artist's drawn oeuvre includes all manner of subjects, including pastoral scenes, nudes, religious, historical and mythological subjects, book illustrations, chinoiserie, landscapes, nudes, genre scenes, studies of children and heads, as well as designs for tapestries, porcelain and fountains. He produced many finished drawings as independent works, often adapting and elaborating a head or figure from one of his paintings. While his preference was for black, red, and (particularly in his later years) brown chalk, Boucher also made highly finished drawings in pastel and, at times, drew on coloured paper. A large number of his drawings were finished works for collectors and the art market, and many were engraved and reproduced in considerable numbers – often making use of new printmaking techniques that allowed chalk drawings to be reproduced with a high degree of verisimilitude - by such printmakers as Louis-Marin Bonnet, Gilles Demarteau or Gabriel Huquier. His drawings were greatly admired, and while many were preparatory studies for his paintings, others were produced as finished works of art, to be sold to collectors or reproduced by engravers. Indeed, Boucher's popularity as a draughtsman owes much to the fact that many of his drawings were reproduced and widely distributed as engravings.