

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 Barnet*, 31 January 2018, p.36, under lot 7.

Artist description:

As a modern writer has noted, 'Boucher is the artist par excellence of the French Rococo, in which a perceptive wit, a sense of elegance and a conscious feeling for style were combined with a fluent imagination; this was art designed for a sophisticated audience, for an urban and country society.' The son of a painter at the Académie de Saint-Luc, François Boucher was a pupil of the painter François Lemoyne and the engraver Jean-François Cars. Although he won 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, and was obliged to remain in Paris. His first significant project was producing numerous engravings after drawings by Antoine Watteau for Jean de Jullienne's Figures de differents caractères. The payment he received for this work allowed the artist to travel to Rome at his own expense; he arrived in Italy in 1728, lodging at the Académie de France, and returned to Paris around 1731, when he was admitted (agrée) into the Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture as a history painter. While his early reputation was based on his work as a designer and printmaker, resulting in numerous drawings for prints and book illustrations, he also painted several works for the Parisian home of his first significant patron, the lawyer François Derbais, executed between 1732 and 1734. Reçu at the Académie in 1734, Boucher received his initial royal commission not long afterwards, for four grisaille paintings for Versailles. He soon became the favourite painter of Louis XV's mistress, the Marquise de Pompadour, and painted decorations for the royal chateaux at Versailles, Fontainebleau, Marly and elsewhere, as well as several private homes in Paris, notably the Hôtel de Soubise and the Hôtel Mazarin.

Appointed a professor at the Académie Royale in 1735, Boucher painted numerous easel pictures – pastoral landscapes, religious and mythological subjects, genre scenes, chinoiseries and portraits – for private clients in France, Sweden, Denmark, Germany and Poland, while also producing several tapestry cartoons for the Beauvais and Gobelins manufactories, where he succeeded Jean-Baptiste Oudry as inspecteur des ouvrages in 1755. He designed stage sets and costumes for the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique in the 1740s and created designs for Vincennes and later Sèvres porcelain throughout the 1750s and early 1760s. In 1765 Boucher was named premier peintre du roi, or First Painter to the King, and also appointed director of the Académie Royale. In 1770 he died at his lodgings in the Louvre and was buried in the church of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois. Among his pupils were Jean-Baptiste Deshays and Pierre-Antoine Baudouin, both of whom became his sons-in-law and predeceased him, as well as Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Jean-Baptiste Le Prince and Gabriel-Jacques de Saint-Aubin.

A gifted draughtsman, François Boucher was as prolific as he was talented, and claimed to have produced ten thousand drawings over a career that lasted some fifty years. He was, in fact, perhaps the most prolific French draughtsman of the eighteenth century, and his drawn oeuvre includes pastoral scenes, nudes, religious, historical and mythological subjects, book illustrations, chinoiseries, landscapes, genre scenes, studies of children and heads, as well as designs for tapestries, porcelain and fountains. Although most of his drawings were preparatory studies for his paintings, Boucher also produced 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) a dark brown chalk, he also made highly finished drawings in pastel and, at times, drew on coloured paper. As Pierre Rosenberg has succinctly noted, 'Boucher's love of drawing never waned with time and success. Admittedly, drawing was kept in its proper place, as a vital link between the conception or the idea of a work or composition, and its realization, its metamorphosis into a painting…To quote Mariette, Boucher "was a born painter", but he placed great emphasis on drawing throughout his entire career.' Boucher's drawings were avidly collected in his lifetime by such connoisseurs as Barthelémy-Augustin Blondel d'Azaincourt, Paul Randon de Boisset, Pierre-Jacques-Onésyme Bergeret de Grancourt, Gilbert Paignon-Dijonval, Jean-Claude Gaspard de Sireuil, Count Carl Gustaf Tessin, and many others.

Boucher's drawn oeuvre includes all manner of subjects, including pastoral scenes, nudes, religious, historical and mythological subjects, book illustrations, chinoiseries, 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.