

François BOUCHER (Paris 1703 - Paris 1770)

The Head of a Young Woman Looking to the Right

Black, red and white chalk, with traces of framing lines in black ink.

220 x 166 mm. (8 5/8 x 6 1/2 in.)

Almost certainly executed as an autonomous work of art in its own right, this fine sheet may be grouped with a number of drawings of the heads of young women that François Boucher produced throughout his career, but particularly in the 1750s and 1760s. These were not portraits as such, but rather intended as idealized types of feminine beauty. As the late Alastair Laing has noted of these head studies, 'it is a branch of drawing that goes back to the exquisite studies of female heads and coiffure produced in the Renaissance by, above all, Florentine draftsmen; but in Boucher's hands – and especially in a medium of red, black, and white chalks ("aux trois crayons") – such studies of women's heads gained a new immediacy. Sometimes these drawings are studies for, or are derived from, heads in paintings; very often, they are perfectly self-sufficient.' A number of 18th century French collectors, such as Gabriel Huquier the Elder and Jean-Claude Gaspard de Sireuil, owned large numbers of such drawings of heads by Boucher.

As one scholar has noted, 'Perhaps more than any other artist of his day, Boucher strove to create an ideal of feminine grace and charm, and if a tête de femme or tête de jeune fille was based on an actual model, it quickly became a generalized type in which all individual features were abandoned, and whose sole function was to please the eye of the beholder...They are not portraits, nor do they show any suggestion of sensuality; their only aim is to express a loveliness which is sometimes merely pretty, but at other times verges on the austere.' Of such late drawings as the present sheet, the Boucher scholar Françoise Joulie has written that 'Around 1765, François Boucher...drew women's faces of a new elegance and serenity; more 'noble' than 'coquettish'...they are easily recognisable by the width of their

foreheads, their large eyes under perfectly arched eyebrows and their elegantly curled hair held in place by a ribbon. The mouth is larger, the face has lost its mischievous aspect and exudes a great deal of gentleness.' Among comparable late drawings by Boucher is a Head of a Young Woman in a private collection.

We are grateful to Françoise Joulie for confirming the attrribution of the present sheet.

Exhibitions

London, Royal Academy of Arts, Exhibition of French Art 1200-1900, 1932, no.756 (lent by S. S. Bond); King's Lynn, Fermoy Gallery, French Drawings of the 17th and 18th Century, 1985, no.4 (lent anonymously); London, Thos. Agnew & Sons Ltd., From Claude to Géricault: The Arts in France 1630-1830, 1986, no.26 (lent from a private collection).

Literature:

L. Soullié and Ch. Masson, 'Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint et dessiné de François Boucher', in André Michel, François Boucher, Paris, 1906, p.115, no.2068 ('Tête de jeune fille. H. 0m23. L. 0m17 – Vue de profil, à droite. Au crayon noir, à l'estompe, légèrement retouché au pastel. Vente Féral, 19-20 février 1869.', not illustrated); Commemorative Catalogue of the Exhibition of French Art, 1200-1900. Royal Academy of Arts, London. January - March 1932, Oxford, 1933, p.142, no.648; The Burlington Magazine, June 1967, illustrated p.xxxiii [advertisement]; Geoffrey Agnew, ed., French Drawings of the 17th and 18th Century, exhibition brochure, King's Lynn, 1985, p.111, no.4, illustrated in colour on the cover; London, Thos. Agnew & Sons Ltd., From Claude to Géricault: The Arts in France 1630-1830, exhibition catalogue, 1986, p.47, no.26.

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.