The Political and Social Implications of François Boucher’s
Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour (1750)

From cheerful pastel hues to themes of love, folly and youth, Rococo style is characterized by fantasies that transport viewers into vibrant and often playful scenes. One artist who exemplifies these qualities is François Boucher. Although he created many artworks over his lifetime, one of his most well-known works is Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour (Fig. 1), an oval portrait of Madame de Pompadour which now resides in the Harvard Art Museums.1 Dominated by shades of white, rose and cobalt, the colour palette of this artwork is the perfect embodiment of the rich tones used in Rococo style.2 Painted in 1750 and measuring 81.2 cm by 64.9 cm, this oil on canvas offers an intimate glimpse into Madame de Pompadour’s cosmetics routine, showing her in the midst of applying make-up at her toilette.3 The painting’s origins are murky, but she may have commissioned it as a gift for her brother when she was thirty-seven years old.4 Given that her physical beauty was quickly fading due to several illnesses, the painting served two purposes: to immortalize Madame de Pompadour’s alluring appearance, and to express the political clout she commanded in the court of Louis XV.5

Looking at this painting, Madame de Pompadour hardly appears as though she is ailing; she gives every impression that she is in perfect health. Her face is flawlessly made-up, with rouge highlighting the apples of her cheeks and contrasting with her delicate, ivory complexion.

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1 Melissa Hyde, Making Up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006), 108.
2 Hyde, 107.
3 Hyde, 107–8.
5 Lajer-Burcharth, 70.
Her piercing blue eyes are luminescent, revealing a quiet, knowing confidence. With calm composure, she directly faces the viewer, a slight smile curving her lips. Her steady and collected gaze enhances the intimacy of the scene, as her eyes draw the viewer towards her. To portray her face, Boucher used soft, nearly-invisible brushstrokes, which emphasize her graceful and elegant beauty. The hazy brushwork softens her facial features and represents her in an ethereal manner, while contrasting with the short and distinct brushstrokes used for her hair. These precise strokes allow its curly texture to be visible, while making her locks feel touchable. Similar brushwork is used to render the bright azure flowers that are tucked into her perfectly coiffed hair.

Garments and accessories are also carefully painted using varied brushstrokes, to impressive effect. For Madame de Pompadour’s gauzy, silvery-white négligé du matin, Boucher utilizes loose, sweeping strokes to reveal the silky texture and lightweight nature of the fabric. It falls open to expose a triangular section of her chest and the tight bodice of her similarly-coloured gown, while cascading over layers of intricate, frilled lace, rendered with tightly controlled brushstrokes. Pink bows adorn her clothes, with one fastening her peignoir at her throat, another embellishing her billowing sleeves and several swathing her bodice. On her right wrist, a cameo bracelet of her lover, King Louis XV, rests conspicuously, proudly announcing their relationship. His profile is carved on a background in the same pink hue as her bows, and is surrounded by shiny teal gemstones. Boucher meticulously depicts this bracelet with numerous minute brushstrokes.

Madame de Pompadour’s gestures show that she is in the midst of her cosmetics routine, as she clasps a rouge brush in one hand and loosely holds a rouge box in the other. The brush is loaded with powder, ready for application. She pinches it between her thumb and forefinger, her pinky jauntily raised. The rouge and brush are reminiscent of how a painter holds a paintbrush
and palette, suggesting that her application of make-up is analogous to how an artist portrays figures through various media, from sketches to paintings. In front of Madame de Pompadour, there are accessories strewn on her dressing table, which is covered in a creased tablecloth. Another voluminous snowy-white powder puff rests atop a bronze box near scattered cerulean ribbons and soft-hued flowers of yellow, purple and blue. To her right, there is a mirror, and to her left, we can see the ornately beaded back of her yellow brocade chair. These luxurious details reveal the subject’s status and wealth at court.

Even more, make-up itself had political and social meaning in the court of Louis XV; painting one’s face represented status and nobility. Madame de Pompadour’s cosmetics routine was not simply a beauty ritual; she could assert her agency and strengthen her political position through her manufactured appearance, as the make-up she wore relayed her position and power to other nobles. While this was reinforced by her extravagant clothing and accessories, her make-up would have played a distinctive, critical role in her carefully constructed semblance. It was the act of transformation itself that held power, as appearing in court with a naked face would imply weakness and even cause a small scandal. By capturing Madame de Pompadour in the act of assembling her appearance, viewers are shown how she crafts a politically powerful image through her careful and immaculate application of make-up, alongside her elaborate accessories and garments. The scene would have resonated throughout the court, as other nobles would have likely seen the painting, despite it having been commissioned for her brother.

6 Hyde, Making Up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics, 109.
7 Frederick Ilchman et al., Casanova: The Seduction of Europe (Boston: MFA Publications, 2017), 124.
8 Hyde, Making Up the Rococo: François Boucher and His Critics, 107.
Madame de Pompadour’s toilette was especially known for the business meetings that occurred there. At the time, women would typically entertain guests during their maquillage routines in the late morning. Madame de Pompadour turned this social ritual into an influential space in which she could conduct delicate business deals. Since the toilette created an informal environment, the typical strict rules of formal court etiquette did not apply, which allowed for more casual conversations. Therefore, her toilette became crucial in two ways: not only did she fabricate her appearance there, but it was a vital location for settling business affairs, as many members of the court participated in this practice with her.

There is a second significant presence in the painting: Louis XV himself, which is surprising for a portrait, especially one of the politically important Madame de Pompadour. Although the focus is on her, and Louis XV only appears as a small profile on her cameo bracelet, his existence within the artwork has noteworthy implications. The relationship between the two began when she became his primary mistress; through this relationship, Madame de Pompadour gained his trust and immense political power, which was highly unusual as she had not been born an aristocrat. However, their physical relationship was brief due to her many ailments and advancing age, and at the time of this painting’s creation, the two were merely close friends, causing Madame de Pompadour to struggle to retain her position at court. Upon first glance, the image of Louis XV seems to symbolize his authority over her, as the bracelet can be interpreted as literally shackling and binding her to him. Yet the profile of Louis XV that appears

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10 Lajer-Burcharth, “Pompadour’s Touch: Difference in Representation,” 71.
11 Lajer-Burcharth, 71.
13 Ichman et al., *Casanova: The Seduction of Europe*, 124.
on the bracelet is a specific one, cut in gemstone by Jacques Guay.\textsuperscript{14} Madame de Pompadour helped to design this cameo, and as such, it was her conception that was painted by Boucher.\textsuperscript{15} It can then be concluded that the bracelet is not a sign of the king’s control; rather, the king’s profile is a reference to the influence Madame de Pompadour held over him.

As a whole, the painting is captivating in its enchanting portrayal of Madame de Pompadour, while demonstrating how she used her complex cosmetics ritual to maintain her political power and aristocratic status. Just as she could fabricate and alter her image with make-up, she was able to influence the depiction of herself in this painting by François Boucher. Even though Madame de Pompadour’s beauty was already quickly fading during the creation of this painting, her mesmerizing power — both personal and political — is clear to this day.

\textsuperscript{14} Lajer-Burcharth, “Pompadour’s Touch: Difference in Representation,” 77.
\textsuperscript{15} Jones, Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress, 81.
Fig. 1. François Boucher, *Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour*, ca. 1750.

Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge.
Bibliography


