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Jessica Priebe, *François Boucher and the Art of Collecting in Eighteenth-Century France*. London: Routledge, 2022. xvi + 254 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$150.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781472435835; \$44.05 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781003224730.

Review by Alden R. Gordon, Trinity College.

Jessica Priebe has added something new to the spectrum of literature on François Boucher (1703-1770), the most successful French painter and designer of the eighteenth century. [1] *François Boucher and the Art of Collecting in Eighteenth-Century France* approaches Boucher in the context of the history of collecting and display. Priebe has built her book around two exceptional primary source accounts of visits to Boucher's *atelier* and residence in the Louvre palace in the last decade of the artist's life. One was an account from 1767 by an aspiring provincial French *amateur*, [2] and the other was a series of descriptions beginning in 1764 by a German student of Boucher named Johann Christian von Mannlich. [3] What is remarkable about these eyewitness accounts of Boucher's cabinet of curiosities is that there are no parallel descriptions by any of Boucher's fellow artists living in the Louvre nor by any of his French students. Priebe recognized the inviting window these sources opened and designed her research to piece together a glimpse of aspects of Boucher that had previously been overlooked. Priebe gives us the first scholarly study of Boucher as a collector of art and naturalia. In the process, she has also placed Boucher in a context different from the usual art historical compartment of royal academician and painter to France's elite. In Priebe's study, we see Boucher inheriting from his father the ethic of a working-class print entrepreneur who achieved a comfortable livelihood based on hard work, rapid production, and a broad network within the milieu of artists and *amateurs*. Her most successful chapters assemble, for the first time, a view of Boucher as himself an enlightenment *amateur* of natural history, as a print-maker capitalizing on his interest in seashells and corals, and as an artist engaged in the business of buying, selling, and trading art and natural wonders.

It is remarkable how much we don't know about François Boucher and how uneven the existing art historical literature is about him. A profound understanding of Boucher has been stymied by an almost total absence of his own voice. Only a handful of original letters written by Boucher or his wife have survived, even though they lived and worked in one of the great eras of letter writing. Formal letters signed by Boucher as an officer of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture can be found in the Archives Nationales, Série O<sup>1</sup>. The Institut Néerlandais in Paris owns three letters from Boucher written by his wife Marie-Jeanne Buzeau to the dramatist Charles-Simon Favart in 1748, but these are about a print commission between dear friends for a frontispiece for a publication. [4] His life story has been pieced together from the records of the Royal Academy of Painting and of the Direction des Bâtiments du Roi and from his own vast

production of prints, drawings, paintings, and designs that he supplied to the manufactures of Beauvais and Gobelins tapestries and to the Sèvres porcelain factory for biscuit figural sculpture.[5]

Art historians emphasizing art criticism over other primary source evidence have defaulted to Denis Diderot's moralizing criticism of the late work of Boucher, which would have readers believe that Boucher was an inferior artist to Jean-Baptiste Greuze. Jean-François Marmontel, in his *Mémoires*, expressed a very low opinion of the impression that Boucher and his artist colleagues of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture made when they appeared in literary and fashionable company. "They lack, almost all of them, any learning or culture," Marmontel condescendingly asserted.[6] Now, we have Priebe's account of Boucher as a knowledgeable and respected collector and naturalist to whom aristocrats, foreigners, and fellow collectors would apply for the privilege of conversing with and seeing his extraordinary collections of paintings, drawings, and natural wonders.

Priebe's account of the crush of buyers at Boucher's posthumous estate sale also helps correct the notion that the opinion of Boucher's taste, and the desire to own his art or works associated with him, had collapsed by the 1760s. The evidence from the records of Boucher's fulfilled commissions and active patrons—right up to his death in 1770—shows that Boucher never lost a single commission owing to Diderot's negative criticism.

Priebe's book is a solid step in broadening the angles of approach in Boucher studies. In her first chapter, "Modernizing Watteau: Marketing Luxury in France and Sweden," she correctly sees Boucher in an international context as one of the heirs and interpreters of Watteau's new genre of everyday life. She never falls into the trap of using the term "rococo" to describe the narrative content of Watteau's or Boucher's art. Instead, she identifies what was modern in the 1730s as associated with the imagery of exotic Chinese and Tartar figures, part of the preexisting French luxury market for Chinese art and manufactured goods. In Priebe's construction, Boucher was an artist who was always alert to the commercial realm of trade, collecting, and arts manufactures.

Another significant side of Boucher's art that Priebe reframes in her chapter on "Boucher and the Art of *Conchyliomanie*" is his fascination with sea shells as both collectible objects in the art market, and as the primary evidence for any study of natural history. Priebe demonstrates how prints of decorative arts ornaments by predecessors such as Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier pointed the way for Boucher, as a master draftsman and engraver, to invent a rich variety of etchings for publicity and book publishing based on the sinuous forms of seaweed, coral, and shells. Boucher's father had been, after all, a designer for embroiderers, so it is easy to comprehend how Boucher was completely accepting of seeing his designs used across the spectrum of commercial utilitarian manufactures (textiles, ceramics, tapestry, bronze sculpture, theater scenery, models for clock cases, and book illustration) and in the full range of painted subjects, from *peinture d'histoire* to pastorals, portraits, landscapes, and domestic genre scenes.

Eighteenth-century art scholars hope for at least four areas of Boucher's activity to be elucidated. The most needed is a study of Boucher's use of drawing, since that was the vehicle through which Boucher expressed himself and provided designs for colleagues in all the related arts manufactures. It is clear now that Boucher was never a writer, not even of letters, but he was a constant draughtsman. The second would be a study of Boucher's workshop and the many artists

he employed or helped train. The third would be a reassessment of Boucher's expansive role as a designer for other industries. He provided designs for theater sets and costumes, for tapestry to both the Beauvais and Gobelins manufactures, for bronze sculptures and gilt bronze mounts for cabinetry or lighting fixtures, and for porcelain figurines made at the Sèvres factory. He was a tireless worker and spent long hours at his drafting table and easel. There are dimensions of Boucher we barely knew. Even as I write this review a previously unpublished set of eight drawings by Boucher (of which six are signed) are announced for sale as extra-illustrations in Madame de Pompadour's own 1757 book of hours.[7]

Happily, Jessica Priebe has now supplied the fourth missing study, helping fill a gap in our knowledge of Boucher as a collector.

#### NOTES

[1] The most important recent author on Boucher has been Alastair Laing, who was the principal contributor to the 1986 exhibition catalog *François Boucher 1703-1770* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986). See also Alastair Laing, "François Boucher," *Oxford Art Online* (2003, updated 2008). <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T010423>.

[2] Joseph-Henri Costa de Beauregard, *Journal de voyage d'un jeune noble Savoyard à Paris en 1766-1767*, ed. Patrick Michel (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2013).

[3] Johann Christian von Mannlich, *Histoire de ma vie (1741-1822)*, ed. Karl-Heinz Bender and Herman Kleber, 2 vols. (Trier: Spee-Verlag, 1989).

[4] Madame Boucher to Favart, Frits Lugt Collection, Artists Manuscripts, Inv. 6707 a, b, c, Institut Néerlandais. These letters were published by Alastair Laing, "Trois Lettres de François Boucher et de sa femme à l'auteur dramatique Favart," *Archives de l'art français*, Nouv. Pér., 29 (1988): 19-22.

[5] Pierre Rosenberg, "The Mysterious Beginnings of the Young Boucher," in *François Boucher 1703-1770* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), pp. 41-55.

[6] Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 107 citing J.-F. Marmontel, *Mémoires*, ed. Maurice Tourneaux (Paris, 1891), II, p. 103.

[7] *Office de la sainte Vierge pour tous les Jours de la Semaine* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1757), in two volumes bound in midnight blue morocco leather with the arms of Madame de Pompadour, is being offered as Lot 64 in a sale at Aguttes, Paris, 16 November 2022. The eight drawings by Boucher are in ink, full page size *hors texte* bound with the printed text. The bindings are by Derôme.

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