

Chinoiserie in Eighteenth Century France: Francois Boucher's Imagination of China

Enyu Cui *

St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada

* Corresponding Author Email: enyu.cui@stu.sqxy.edu.cn

Abstract. Through the eyes of Francois Boucher, one of the most prominent court painters of the Rococo period, this essay delves into the enthralling world of Rococo art. Through the analysis of several of Boucher's paintings, such as "The Portrait of Madame de Pompadour" and "The Chinese Garden", the author intends to determine how various aspects of Chinese culture and aesthetics, as interpreted by Boucher's active imagination, were fluidly incorporated into the Rococo aesthetic. This study examines how Boucher deftly incorporated Chinese design elements, such as porcelain and scent sachets, into his works of art. These components, which are frequently considered symbolic of the Orient, provide a one-of-a-kind glimpse into Europeans' fascination with Chinese culture during the Rococo period. This article demonstrates that the influence of Orientalism on the aesthetics of European art is not limited to paintings but rather encompasses architecture as well as everyday objects, like tapestries, by demonstrating how the fusion of Chinese culture and Rococo aesthetics led to this influence.

Keywords: Chinoiserie; francois boucher; rococo art.

1. Introduction

Many people in Europe have begun to take an interest in Chinese culture due to China's rise to global prominence and the expansion of the media. These individuals were taken aback when they learned that elements of Chinese culture had already significantly influenced the Rococo style, which first appeared in France 318 years ago and produced many works of art during that period—as a result of the travels that Marco Polo documented during the 13th century when Chinese goods were first brought to Europe via the Silk Road, marked the beginning of Europeans' exposure to Chinese culture and even oriental culture. The establishment of the East India Company in the 16th century boosted the maritime trade between China and Europe. In later years, with the dissemination of Confucianism, Europeans became even more preoccupied with it. People rarely learn about Francois Boucher's paintings, even though they are an essential part of Chinese culture, and he is considered to be the Rococo style's most iconic painter. The Chinese element was placed on the oil paintings and tapestries, which found a sizable audience in the French court. Even though Boucher never traveled to China, he produced many images that contained Chinese motifs. That is to say that each of his paintings was derived from his imagination. Several Chinese scholars have maintained, "The real Chinese style is not a pale and immature imitation of Chinese objects, but a tangible manifestation of the Western imagination of this distant and hidden country". Then, this article focuses on some specific paintings of Rococo court painter Francois Boucher to see how Chinese culture or elements, based on his imagination, were used in Rococo-style pictures. Additionally, it explores the influence of Orientalism on Europeans with the fusion of Chinese culture and the aesthetic of the Rococo period.

2. Basic Introduction and Characteristics of Francois Boucher's Painting

2.1. Francois Boucher's Paintings in Rococo Style

French artist Francois Boucher, born in the seventeenth century, is regarded as one of the leading figures of the Rococo art period. Because his father was a painter, he had the good fortune to get early training in the arts. Boucher was taken under Francois LeMonie's tutelage as an apprentice when the well-known Rococo movement leader noticed his artistic talent at 17. Boucher was presented with

the Grand Prix de Rome, a famous French painting prize, in 1720. However, he faced a financial obstacle that prevented him from continuing his education in Italy for five years. The artist created a sizable body of work during his lifetime, most of which were historical and portrait paintings, however, he painted landscape at the beginning [1]. He also held the prestigious role of head painter at Louis XV's court. This particular person won Madame Pompadour's great admiration, and he went on to paint many pictures, including her image [2].

Boucher, the artist, made a painting of Madame Pompadour that he named "Madame de Pompadour." (Fig.1) The artwork displayed is a half-length painting of Louis XV's mistress, dressed in lavish clothing and in a graceful reclining position on a sofa. Getting closer to a finer point of analysis. In a departure from traditional portraiture, Boucher placed a mirror behind Madame Pompadour so that onlookers could see her hairstyle mirrored and possibly learn it. In the given schematic (The left picture of Fig.2), Boucher portrayed a powerful woman who greatly impacted Western fashion patterns in this creative arrangement. Her demeanor radiates elegance and composure, and she wears a majestic headdress studded with abundant pearls. The pearls on her headdress or the pearl bracelets, and also the dresses that were adorned with flowers, were the symbols of Venus, suggesting the deification of mistresses [3]. The observer is profoundly affected by the vivid depiction of a clever woman who displays arrogance and contempt towards many facets of life on the canvas.

Nevertheless, the fact that her books were beside her suggested that she strongly preferred intellectual endeavors. A mirror and book-lined shelf, along with letters and ink on the desk next to the sofa, (see the middle and the right picture of Fig.2) suggest that Madame Pompadour was a patroness of many Enlightenment thinkers. Some experts think that Madame Pompadour can become an Enlightenment salonnière instead of pursuing the objective of attracting Louis XV's attention. Additionally, it is suggested that Mmes de Tencin and Geoffrin, well-known members of the salon society at the time, may have previously served as her mentors [4]. Boucher focused on showcasing the marquise's artistic ability rather than her physical attractiveness. She moved to the marquise and sat on the couch; she leaned back on a down coverlet bed, and her big satin bow adorned her breasts, adding even more visual appeal to her physical beauty. The woman's left hand rested on a pillow covered in elaborate embroidery, and her right hand held a book of poetry she was intently reading. The books she was holding emphasized how multifaceted she was.

Additionally, the main reason Boucher became Madame Pompadour's preferred court painter is the striking similarity in their taste in art. The woman in the artwork is noble, elegant, and solemn; she also has a secret charm buried in her lovely, delicate body. Her eyes shine with light, and her face exudes a soft, radiant glow from her exquisite and opulent clothing. Her dark green dress stands out sharply against the delicate pallor of her alabaster skin and the rosininess of her lips and cheeks. Her identity, including her gender and class identities as well as her artistic identity, may also be represented through her makeup [5]. She is positioned to the side of the image, her brilliant brilliance highlighted by the noble and sumptuous surroundings. The lady's vast knowledge and intellectual interests are evident from the bookcase and table ornamented with books arranged at random, which are reflected in the mirror behind her. Her numerous accessories also serve as indicators of her social status and identity. The black dog in the painting's left corner is also an identifier. During that era, pets were always depicted as symbols of sensuality, fertility, nobility, fidelity, protection, and seduction in portraiture [6]. The dog in Pompadour's portrait is interpreted as a symbol of loyalty to the king, and this is further supported by the way the animal looks up at his mistress. Boucher used a blue-green color scheme to portray the elegant features of an aristocratic woman in this painting. Furthermore, he rendered the elaborate embellishments with a tactile sensibility while using precise brushwork to capture the minute details of the garment items. Boucher is quite skilled at styling; she is adept at it.

Boucher's work generally became more sumptuous, complex, and refined due to his influence from Antoine Watteau's perfected realistic techniques. Boucher's paintings have a vibrant, calm, and harmonious atmosphere, contrasting sharply with Watteau's depressing painting technique. It also

contrasts sharply with the dominant high society of the Bouchée era. The influence of Madame Pompadour is responsible for her unique aesthetic approach. Both Madame Pompadour and Boucher were significant individuals in eighteenth-century France, influencing the day's fashion trends. Chinese dress at this time piqued Boucher's interest since it evoked wonder and excitement in Europeans with a mysterious quality. Boucher's production of a sequence of paintings portraying ancient China in the late 1700s was probably inspired by this curiosity.



Fig. 1 Francois boucher, *Madame de Pompadour*, 1756, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany



Fig. 2 Details of the painting: Francois Boucher, *Madame de Pompadour*, 1756, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany

2.2. The Chinese Elements in Boucher's Paintings

Though his series of portraits for Madame Pompadour is his most well-known work, François Boucher's paintings stand apart from those of his contemporaries because they feature Chinese elements or even depict China as he imagined. Giving a few illustrations of these two types of drawings, the drawing titled "The Toilette, also known as Woman fastening her garter" (Fig.3) is titled "La Toilette dit aussi Femme nouant sa jarretière" in French. Viewers tend to concentrate on the two women in the middle when seeing the drawing as a whole. These outfits and positions suggest this is a typical Rococo-style painting with an everyday theme. Upon approaching the folding screen (See the left picture of Fig.4) situated behind them, one can more easily discern that the screen's embellishment—which consists of birds and flowers—is unquestionably not in the Rococo style. It appears more likely to have been introduced from China or the East. Not only is the folding screen similar to the items that originated in China, but so is the shorter folding screen in front of them. The spherical fan on the floor and the tiny fragrant sachet (See the right picture of Fig. 4) hanging on the shorter folding screen demonstrate how fascinated Europeans are with Chinese culture, even though they may only be aware of it through Marco Polo's writings. Following incorporating Chinese artifacts

into his works, Boucher started to imagine and create scenes of everyday Chinese life that included more Eastern themes. Boucher is known for his Chinese-themed paintings, one of which is *The Chinese Garden* (Fig.5). The painting's blue and white hues are reminiscent of porcelain, one of China's most recognizable products of the period. The Chinese elements are the coloring and the indoor plants—such as the bamboo, the round fan, and the porcelain vase. The theme of all these paintings seems to be something happening in the Chinese garden; perhaps it's a quick glimpse of the concubine lounging in the park on a sunny afternoon.



Fig. 3 Francois Boucher, *La Toilette dit aussi Femme nouant sa jarretière*, 1742, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid (Photo: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza)



Fig. 4 Deatils of the painting: Francois Boucher, *La Toilette dit aussi Femme nouant sa jarretière*, 1742, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid (Photo: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza)



Fig. 5 Francois Boucher, *The Chinese Garden*, 1720-1770, The Museum of Fine Arts and Archeology of Besançon, Besançon

2.3. The Fusion of Rococo and Chinese Elements

Boucher made several paintings with Chinese themes, as seen in the illustrations above; nevertheless, it is unclear whether the setting he painted is in China. Not really, is the response. For example, the English title for the picture "Le Repas de l'Empereur de Chine" is "Dinner for the Emperor of China." (Fig.6) It showed the emperor eating dinner, but they were outside in what appeared to be a garden, which is in contrast to the scene of the Chinese emperor dining at that time, which took place in the Qing era (1703–1770). Authentic elegance and refinement were always present in the cuisine of China's emperors, according to a report produced by historians who documented the Qing emperor's daily life. Table opulence was exemplified by dinnerware, silverware, and gold utensils, which is not the sight the Boucher portrayed; instead, the emperor always has tens or perhaps hundreds of items on his table to dine [7].

Furthermore, Boucher has never traveled to China in his entire life. He perhaps drawing inspiration from Marco Polo's book or stories from travelers or merchants who had already visited China, or from the prints which imported from the Suzhou city in China [8]. Upon closer inspection, the behavior shown in the painting resembled that of French nobility more than anything else, resembling a high tea at the Palace of Versailles, save for a few missing artifacts. Going back to Boucher's painting, this assertion suggests that it would be more acceptable to interpret it as a scene of French aristocracy in an Oriental-style Garden, surrounded by individuals with faces reminiscent of the Orient. This kind of fusion denotes the combination of Chinese and Rococo features to create the name "Chinoiserie."



Fig. 6 Francois Boucher, *The Meal of the Emperor of China*, 1742, The Museum of Fine Arts and Archeology of Besançon, Besançon

3. The Factors that Europeans Like Eastern Elements and Their Influence on Western Styles

3.1. The Appearance and Admiration of Eastern Countries in European's Mind

The vast civilizations that inhabited the easternmost portion of the Eurasian landmass were virtually unknown to Europeans until the thirteenth century. The publication of "The Travels of Marco Polo," a book by Marco Polo, has allowed Europeans to gain a comprehensive grasp of far-off Eastern civilizations.

The Silk Road allowed Eastern goods to start coming into Europe. During the late 14th and early 15th centuries, Europe's interactions with China were primarily indirect. Oriental items, particularly Chinese porcelains, were considered incredible rarities and had the enchanted ability to sense poison. Then, the East India Company's founding in 1602 significantly impacted China's economy. The company's entry has resulted in the liberalization and growth of international trade in the Chinese market. The corporation exported British textiles and other items to China and imported Chinese goods like tea, porcelain, and silk. As a result, China's export economy and international trade have grown, which explains why Europeans were increasingly fixated on Eastern culture. Similar to the claim made above that Europeans thought Chinese ceramics could identify poison, oriental goods are said to possess some magical qualities, since Europeans had no idea about the process of producing the porcelain [9,10].

Furthermore, this notion may be related to China's geographic location, far from Europe. Moreover, the Enlightenment saw China in the eighteenth century as a nation that valued reason and morality over religious divine authority, and they articulated their vision of an ideal "republic" during this period, following the missionaries who brought Chinese history, culture, social structure, and ethics to Europe. Emperor Kangxi was also termed "the most perfect and wise monarch who has ruled the world since ancient times" by French missionary Bai Jin. Aristocrats in Europe were willing to incorporate Chinese elements into paintings, tapestries, furniture, and even architecture, like the Chinese Pavilion in Pillnitz Palace (Fig.7), because they wanted to suppress the classical doctrine of the old-fashioned and promote a "pagan" culture. This idea helped elevate Chinese culture's reputation in the West again. Combining their desire for a rational nation with the mystique of Eastern culture led to their fixation on Chinese culture.

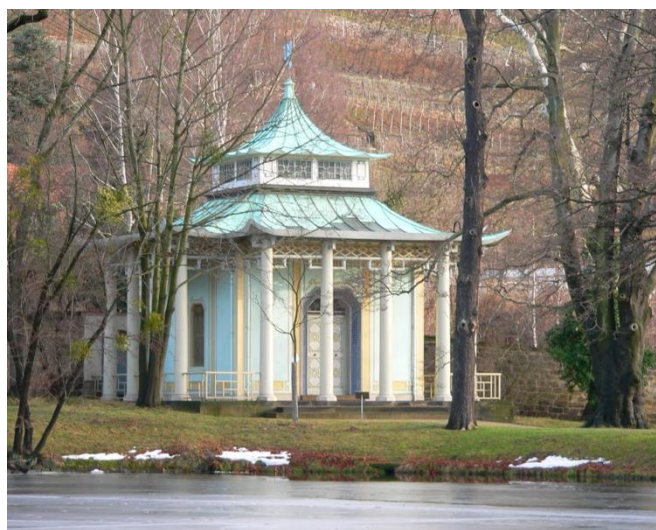


Fig. 7 Chinese Pavilion from Pillnitz Palace, Saxony, Germany

3.2. The Effect of Oriental Art

The craze for oriental objects peaked during the Rococo era as more and more nobility fell in love with them. Though there was a quality leap in technology and production capacity, there were also more missionaries in China, and the European "Industrial Revolution" was born. The Qing Court had

reached the end of its most prosperous era, and there was widespread corruption in the country's administration. The Voltaire praise school lost to the Montesquieu-led criticism school of Sinology. The "Eurocentric" perspective of Sinology was increasingly reflected in the "disenchantment" of Chinese design. At the same time, neoclassicism's rise to prominence and the passing of Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour—who had a particular fondness for "Chinese style"—ended this artistic endeavor. The proponents of European traditional architectural aesthetic thought also had some ideas in response to the "novel" Chinese architectural layout, and the disparities in artistic aesthetics also contributed to the popularity of neoclassicism and suppressed classicism. Though less fixated on Orientalism, Europeans' perceptions of Chinese and Asians are still influenced by it. Stereotypes about how to view Chinese people, or even Asian people in general, or about Chinese culture have been created. The obsession with importing porcelain has made the false impression that China only produces porcelain. Still, the country also produces a wide range of other cultural goods, including Hanfu, or clothing in the Han style, and mortise and tenon construction, "Sun Mao Jiegou" in Chinese, which was used to build nearly every palace in Beijing's Forbidden City. This misinformation is detrimental to disseminating Chinese culture, making it more difficult for people outside of China to learn about it since they may believe that Chinese culture is limited to porcelain.

4. Summary

In conclusion, Francois Boucher's paintings from the Rococo court offer an intriguing glimpse into the intricate fusion of Chinese culture and Rococo aesthetics. In addition to reflecting Europe's long-standing fascination with the Far East, Boucher's inventive integration of Chinese elements into his paintings is a powerful example of the transformational potential of artistic imagination. Boucher's skillful use of motifs, such as folding screens with painted birds, flowers, and porcelain, allowed him to take his audience to a world where the lines between Europe and China were blurred. It used traditional Chinese colors—such as the blue and white of porcelain—and included Chinese motifs. His ability to subtly incorporate Chinese cultural elements into whimsical Rococo-style paintings demonstrates Europeans' deep admiration and curiosity for Chinese culture during this period.

Furthermore, Boucher's creations bear witness to the broader phenomenon of Orientalism, which profoundly impacted European art, fashion, and culture. One can see this influence in Boucher's artwork. Chinese culture combined with the aesthetics of the Rococo era allowed Europeans to escape the confines of their reality and give in to the seduction of the distant Orient. In addition to giving European art's visual lexicon greater depth, this also helped spread cultural concepts throughout a larger audience. Francois Boucher's paintings provide a striking depiction of the mutual fascination that existed during the Rococo era between Europe and China. The 18th century is when these paintings were created. They offer a glimpse into a world where artistic creativity transcended national borders, demonstrating the art's enduring ability to unite disparate elements and span cultural boundaries in a way that makes sense overall. The way Boucher's paintings blend aspects of Chinese culture with the Rococo style demonstrates the enduring influence of Orientalism on European art and culture and also explains the effectiveness of Orientalism. This article still has a lot of limitations, though. For example, this article only discusses Francois Boucher's artwork; many other painters, such as Vincent Willem van Gogh and Oscar-Claude Monet, have also included the Oriental element into their works. Furthermore, the article focuses primarily on the paintings and touches on architecture, but it also discusses how Orientalism influenced furniture design during that era. After reading this article, the author hopes that other academics will be more aware of the impact that Orientalism had on European aesthetics.

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