

2012

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Recommended Citation

Brighidin, Sanda (2012) "The Hierarchy of Rococo Women Seen through Fashion Paintings," *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato*: Vol. 12, Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56816/2378-6949.1009>

Available at: <https://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur/vol12/iss1/1>

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The hierarchy of Rococo women seen through fashion in paintings

By Sanda Brighidin

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URC 2012

Abstract: The style of Rococo evokes a variety of feminine attributions; women were usually depicted in works of art in a decorative manner. Many of the interpretations of these paintings focus on the luxurious clothes and lavish backgrounds. Artists like Jean-Antoine Watteau and Francois Boucher were responsible for elevating a very elegant view of Rococo women of Rococo within the public's eyes. But there were also depictions of non-aristocratic women that were geared more to the middle class (bourgeois). After reading a number of articles and book chapters on Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, and visiting the Louvre museum in Paris, I became aware that his works were usually of women engaged in the activities of daily life and busy household work. I want to argue that a detailed study of fashion within paintings can tell us a lot about the different social classes and hierarchies of 18th century France. My proposed research contributes to the understanding of the different roles and expectations between the social classes by focusing on the depiction of fashion in French paintings of the 18th century.

The style of Rococo evokes a variety of feminine attributions; women were usually depicted in works of art in a decorative manner. Many of the interpretations of these paintings focus on the luxurious clothes and lavish backgrounds. Artists like Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) and Francois Boucher (1703-70) were responsible for elevating a very elegant view of Rococo women within the public's eyes. But there were also depictions of non-aristocratic women that were geared more to the middle class (bourgeois). After reading a number of articles and book chapters on Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin (1699-1779), and visiting the Louvre in Paris, I noticed that his works were usually of women engaged in the activities of daily life and busy household work. I want to argue that a detailed study of fashion within paintings can tell us a lot about the different social classes and hierarchies of 18th century France. I had the opportunity to explore the differences between the social classes also by visiting the palace of Versailles, which allowed me to experience the luxurious life of aristocratic women of the Rococo period. As a result of my research I became aware of the differences between Chardin's representations of bourgeois life and those by artists such as Watteau and Boucher. The visits to museums and the books I have read demonstrated the role played by Chardin's work as an alternative to the luxurious Rococo style. My research contributes to a closer understanding of the different roles and expectations between the social classes by focusing on the depiction of fashion, cosmetics and environments in French paintings of the 18th century.

The extravagance of the French Rococo style has always attracted my attention. The complexity of curved lines and the greatness of luxury sparked my interests for the style. A period that today we mainly associate with Louis XV (1710-74), XVI (1754-93),

Marie Antoinette and Madame de Pompadour (1721-64), has stamped an almost century-long history with its graceful decorations¹. As a style Rococo presented itself embodied in the flourish of its curves and serpentine lines, condemning itself to luxurious and exaggerated associations². As a quick introduction we ought to know that the word Rococo hardly existed in the 18th century; it only became used as artistic jargon by the end of the century. Generally contemporaries of that style would use specific words to refer to the decorative style we refer to today as Rococo, including *gout moderne* or modern taste, *gout du temps* or taste of time, *genre pittoresque* or picturesque kind. Rococo gained official access into the French Academy's Dictionary only by 1842, according to whose entry "Rococo is said to be a trivial kind of ornamental style and design that belongs to school of the reign of Louis XV and the beginning of Louis XVI. The rococo style followed Madame de Pompadour, which is but a nuance of the Rococo"³ Since Rococo has marked itself as luxurious trendsetter, it is interesting to study how women actually engaged with this style. Noticing the role of women in society, their intelligence, wit, and grace must be an important element to one's references into the depth of Rococo as a style.⁴ However, scholar Remy Saisselin has noted that "[...] in terms of social analysis the Rococo has been associated with the nouveaux riches of the bourgeois⁵," and this statement is what piqued my interest in analyzing the paintings of the eighteenth century, especially the ones that would contribute the answers to my questions raised during my research on women's status.

¹ Remy G. Saisselin, "The Rococo as a Dream of Happiness," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 19 (1960): 145, accessed February 17, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/428280>.

² Ibid

³ Fiske Kimball, *The creation of Rococo* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1943): 4-5

⁴ Saisselin, "The Rococo as a Dream of Happiness" 150

⁵ Ibid.



Fig. 1 Maurice-Quentin Delatour *Madame de Pompadour*, 1755

Madame de Pompadour, an ambitious intellectually accomplished woman⁶, became an easy target of adoration of many French Rococo painters: Francois-Hubert Drouais, Francois Boucher, Jean-Marc Nattier and Maurice-Quentin Delatour. Her status was elevated step by step, as first the bourgeois wife of a tax farmer, introduced to the court of Louis XV, becoming his official mistress, and ultimately gaining the title of marquise only after to be the lady-in-waiting to the queen. Pompadour gained her title as the symbolic “godmother of Rococo.”⁷ Upon my arrival at the Louvre museum in Paris, I was struck with the image of Mme de Pompadour. (Fig.1) Delatour’s 1755 painting of her shows her surrounded by evidence of cultivation and enlightened tastes in literature, her aesthetic sensibilities, and her talent in music⁸. For reasons that will become apparent in this paper, I want to emphasize that the painting embodies the stylistic references to intelligence and talent through the direct presence of books and musical notes. However, the books were a strong symbol in common usage, since reading became a sign identifying middle class females with private domesticity and which began to undermine distinction between

⁶ Melissa Hyde, “The Makeup of the Marquise: Boucher’s Portrait of Pompadour at her Toilette,” *The Art Bulletin* 82(2000): 463, accessed February 17, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3051397>.

⁷ Hyde “The Makeup of the Marquise” 455.

⁸ Ibid.

middle and upper class women as they are represented in high art⁹. This painting is thus evidence of the French Rococo women of the higher hierarchy establishing bonds with the bourgeoisie through simple creative symbols of reading and books. Also, I noticed a duplicate meaning, since Mme de Pompadour was the protagonist for the social environment in the eighteenth century, but started out herself as a bourgeois. The painting also depicts her earlier life, with an unforgettable reference to her past life, through the use of books and the action of reading.

Since the French population tended to look upon the royals as fashionable both in dress and lifestyle, occasionally it would acquire their appearances, manners, and national symbols of the cultural elite¹⁰. Even the most beloved painter of Mme de Pompadour, Boucher, tended to portray her as a trendsetter. However it could also be a choice of hers as patron, for clearly she has not forgotten about her roots. Mme de Pompadour's powdered coiffure with hair drawn away from the face, alabaster neck and shoulders surmounted by the ideal face at midcentury are markers of the era's style and notions of beauty. According to Hyde, she is depicted as delicately plump, perfectly oval, accented by a small chin, straight nose, sparkling eyes, and smoothly arching brows and a dramatically use of feverishly high color of expansively rouged cheeks¹¹. Extravagant dress, rich embroidery, ornamental and exaggerated clothing decoration, all contribute to our understanding of the eighteenth-century Rococo style. On her feet, one sees a common type of Rococo shoe, mules, white leather heels, which came to be known as the

⁹ Mary L. Bellhouse "Visual Myths of Female Identity in Eighteenth-Century France" *International Political Science Review* 12 (1991): 118, accessed February 19, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601392>.

¹⁰ Hyde "The Makeup of the Marquise" 469.

¹¹ Hyde "The Make up of the Marquise" 460.

Pompadour heel. Even the use of cosmetics, according to author Melissa Hyde was an accessory of most every woman's dressing table.

Considered to be the painter par excellence of the bourgeoisie in France, Chardin represented his personages in distinctly lower or middle class environments. He found his subjects and inspirations in the labor and tranquility, the duties and modest entertainment, of the lower middle class, which was, his own class¹². His audience could easily recognize or even identify with those depicted, including mothers, maids, and governesses. Even if the French Rococo period is presented to today's audience through the vision of luxurious and lavish lives, my research has shown that eighteenth-century life was seen as valuable to society and deserving of respect; the dignified mother was esteemed, the coquette judged indecorous¹³. As the quality of daily life became more dominated by commerce and industry, the middle class home began increasingly to be perceived as a protected place. There is a related and distinctive interest in Chardin's paintings. He chose to develop the subject of women as proud and hard working with quick-witted, strong minds; as Albert Skira put it, as independent women whose sons were to bring about the Revolution¹⁴.

¹² Bellhouse "Visual Myths of Female Identity" 127.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Albert Skira, *The Taste of Our Time* (Ohio: Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1963): 60/

It might at first seem surprising to note that among the patrons of Chardin are members of the aristocracy. Louis XV paid 1500 francs (the highest price paid for any of Chardin's pictures in his lifetime) for the *Lady with a Bird-Organ* (1753). Louis XV was



Fig. 2 Jean-Simeon-Baptiste Chardin - *Industrious Mother* 1740

also in the possession of the two other works: *Saying Grace* (1740) and *The industrious mother* (1740). In the *Industrious mother* (Fig. 2), a painting displayed in the Louvre, Chardin pictured a girl who is being upbraided for some careless work on embroidery, with her mother pointing out an error. It is a comfortable bourgeois household, with rococo candelabra, a

fire screen and teapot at the fireplace, and a large folding screen. The girl wears a soft white capucine or short cap. Her mother wears a similar cap in slightly different color. A connection to Boucher's and Delatour's painting of Mme de Pompadour is made by Chardin through the use of the same shoes, which are white heeled mules. A difference between both classes, middle and high, that one notices within the same simple bourgeois setting in the living room, is the style of clothing and choice of material. The dresses Chardin depicts do not carry any floral decorations as Madame de Pompadour's. Even the colors are not as vivid and bright, but emerge with a choice of pastel nuances. The intimate atmosphere recreates an ordinary day that was to be expected of any bourgeois family, especially its female members.

According to an anonymous writer on the Salon of 1741: "It is always the Bourgeoisie

[Chardin] brings into play... There is not a single woman of the Third Estate [commoners], who does not think it an image of her figure, who does not see her own domestic establishment, her polished manners, her countenance, her daily occupation, her morals, the moods of her children, her furniture, her wardrobe.”¹⁵ As I have noted, in the previous work of Mme de Pompadour, there were references to her earlier life and identity as bourgeois. Therefore, it can be argued that Louis XV,s action of acquiring some works done by Chardin may have been a reflection of his interest in presenting himself as somebody who could relate to the common citizens of France.



Fig. 3 Jean-Marc Nattier *Queen Marie Leczinska* 1748

I have studied the simplified dresses worn by the bourgeoisie women in Chardin paintings and the lack of any cosmetics or jewelry. The spiritual references to motherhood and the hardworking wife gain great importance, being part of Chardin’s idea of eighteenth-century life. His ordinary life is reflected by the subject matter of his paintings, even though he knew other court painters such as Boucher and Watteau.

Chardin was advocating the appropriate simplicity, moderation, and modesty as well good order, so much implied by the Church of the eighteenth century. I noticed a similar modesty in an interesting representation of Queen Marie Leczinska (Fig. 3), wife to Louis XV, in a work by Jean-Marc Nattier painted in 1748. Clearly a woman who has rejected the use of cosmetics, Her Majesty was one of the few women at Versailles who did not

¹⁵ Philip Conisbee, *Chardin* (Lewisburg:Bucknell University Press, 1985): 168.

use any “paint,” perhaps because of the Church’s disapproval for the makeup, as Hyde suggests¹⁶, even if it continued to be fashionable and worn at court. The Queen opted for the wine-red velvet gown, bordered with dark fur and a little lace cup, seen so often in the paintings of Chardin’s women. The Queen has chosen a dress, with no embroidery, no trace of any precious jewelry, and even without any suggestion of the shoes she could have been wearing. Besides her husband, the King, personages related to the other classes of her country surround Marie Leczinska. The depictions of the royals pursuing a simple and honest life served as propaganda in order to gain confidence and love from their subjects.

In conclusion, my study of multiple works by Chardin and other 18th-century painters has enabled me to discover the way hierarchies were consolidated through the depiction of fashion in paintings. The royal court was primarily represented through an integration of lavish and luxurious decorations, in backgrounds as well as clothing. But depictions of individuals such as Mme de Pompadour, who was not born rich, contain symbolic attributions; books and reading that suggest connection with the other classes. Also through my research, I was able to conclude that the social structure of the middle-class is also reflected in royal representations, whether by purchasing a painting or being depicted in one. Although the French Rococo is widely associated with extravagance, my research has shown that the role played by bourgeois values was an important factor in both the way nobility and the middle class were depicted.

¹⁶ Hyde “The Makeup of the Marquise” 459.

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Author:

Sanda Brighidin was born and grew up in Chisinau, Republic of Moldova. Sanda moved to Minnesota to become a student of Art History as well as Mass Media at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Sanda aspires to pursue a career in the Arts World, specifically receiving work experience in the field of auctioneering. After graduation, Sanda would like to attend a graduate program that will help her advance towards her future career.

Faculty Mentor:

Curt Germundson is an associate professor in the Art Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato, where he has taught Art History courses since 2001. He received his BA in 1988 from the University of California at Berkeley and his Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 2001. Dr. Germundson has published articles on the German collage artist Kurt Schwitters and is particularly interested in the way Schwitters uses the idea of the "Cathedral" in his work in order to create a synthesis of "private" and "public."