

The sense of sensual femininity in François Boucher's *The Toilette of Venus*

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François Boucher (French, Paris 1703–1770 Paris)

The Toilette of Venus

1751

Oil on canvas

François Boucher, a beloved artist in the French Royal Academy, and particularly loved by Madame de Pompadour, was the creator of the famous painting *The Toilette of Venus* (1751). The work has since become one of the paragons of the 18th-century Rococo art movement—characterized by artistic traits, including a light color palette and extravagant ornamentation. Close visual analysis of this composition in particular reveals how the painter utilizes asymmetrical composition, unsaturated colors, and graceful lines for the purpose of capturing a sense of sensual pleasure and theatrical femininity, emanating from the central figure—Venus, the Roman goddess of love—and offering a naturalistic and light-hearted interpretation of the scene of the allegorical nude, Venus, preparing herself after a bath.

Central to the composition is Venus with a gentle ray of light coming diagonally down from the upper left onto her, illuminating her from head to toe; this use of light places the title subject at utmost importance to the painting and focuses her with an almost theatrical feel. Despite the cluttered surroundings, the brightness draws the viewers' eyes to the central subject right from the beginning of their viewing experience. The overall composition of this artwork is balanced but not symmetrical, which makes it all the more interesting visually and enhances a sense of frivolity and playfulness.

Boucher's use of cool neutral colors in the background and warm colors in the foreground helps the foreground appear more prominent; the technique of atmospheric perspective is applied to convince the viewers of an illusion of space on a flat surface, thus not only conferring the painting a higher degree of naturalism but also directing the viewer's attention from the main figure to the objects laying on the floor: freshly picked

colorful roses, yellow silk damask, and an ivory pearl necklace in order to impart the viewers a sense of delicate indulgence in her. Furthermore, the fairly muted, unsaturated colors throughout the composition coupled with the low tonal value on the subject's skin produce the ethereal luminosity of Venus's skin without blemishes or scars, and the rosy complexion of her demure look for the purpose of creating a sense of sensual pleasure and elegant femininity, not to mention another contributing element of contrast between the crisp white on the dove's feathers and warm creamy white of her skin.

In addition to color, Boucher traces Venus's body with gracefully flowing lines that define the fine curves of each part of her anatomically accurate physique. Contrary to the erotically curvaceous depiction of Venus in other art periods, the soft contour lines together with subtly dissolving shadows help to shape Venus to be more elegantly refined, and therefore lend the artwork greater emotional feelings of intimacy, affection, and love.

François Boucher's *The Toilette of Venus* (1751) is truly a masterpiece based on his skillful utilization of composition, color, line, and many other elements. Those distinctive characteristics of Rococo-style are unapologetically present throughout. Historical judgments aside, in Pompadour's heart of hearts, she must have been over the moon when this commission was first revealed to her. After all, what could be better to improve one's mood than losing oneself in an exquisite personalized painting while bathing?