“Cospetto! Che bella cosa!”, “My what a beautiful thing!”
Boucher’s *Triumph of Venus* in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

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Boucher’s *Triumph of Venus* in the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

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**In the summer of 1896** – a decade after the competition for the decoration of the staircase hall of Stockholm’s Nationalmuseum had been launched – the forty-three-year-old artist Carl Larsson (1853–1919) unveiled six wall panels adorning the lower staircase of the Grand Entry. His series celebrated the historical origins of the Swedish national collections, from the painter David Ehrenstrahl to the sculptor Tobias Sergel, and his third mural serves to introduce the subject of this article (Fig. 2).²

An immaculately bewigged Count Carl Gustaf Tessin (1695–1770) is shown reviewing engravings with his sovereign, Queen Lovisa Ulrika – whom he had accompanied from Berlin to Stockholm in July 1744 on the occasion of her marriage to the heir to the throne designate, Prince Adolf Frederik of Holstein-Gottorp. With her courtiers admirably immersed in studying folio sheets of old master prints and drawings, everyone seems unaware of the arrival of Boucher’s *Triumph of Venus* in its splendid frame that is being unveiled and born aloft by a trio of putti. We favor more secure methods of art transportation and installation today.

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Fig. 1 François Boucher (1703–1770), *The Triumph of Venus*, 1740. Oil on canvas, 130 x 162 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NM 770.
Boucher’s *Triumph of Venus* painted for Count Tessin in the summer of 1740 was sold, along with much of his superb collection of paintings to King Fredrik I in December 1749 (Fig. 1). In dire financial straits, Tessin had initially arranged for his collection to be auctioned in Amsterdam through the offices of the Swedish merchant Claes Grill (1705–1767). At the last minute, the aging King made a New Year’s Gift of Tessin’s collection to the Crown Prince and Princess. Lovisa Ulrika informed her mother, Sofia Dorothea, Queen Dowager of Prussia: “The King has given me a present of the magnificent picture cabinet of the comte de Tessin, which most assuredly consists of only the most beautiful things, containing not only the very best works of the French modern school, but also those of the old masters.”

In the late 1760s, the painting – now in Drottningholm – would inspire one of the most rousing of Carl Michael Bellman’s *Fredman’s Epistles*: “Bläsen nu alla, number 25”. The poem begins:

“Blow now your trumpets/Hark the Waves Swelling and the Thunder Rumbling/Venus rules where Neptune Dwells. Swim all ye Tritons/ and Sing ye millions in praise of Frojal. Respond ye Postillions in Neptune’s court! Behold Venus in all her Glory. Keeping guard around her, are putti, dolphins, and zephyrs: Paphos’s entire army, with the sea nymphs encircling her in the waves.”

Then as now, Boucher’s *Triumph of Venus* held pride of place in Tessin’s collection; it is generally considered the artist’s most beautiful mythological painting. Boucher charged Tessin 1,600 livres for the painting and the frame – we note, in Tessin’s immaculate accounts, “Boucher för måhlingen och ramen” (Fig. 3) – and the Ambassador remitted payment on 26 August 1740. This was by far the most money that Tessin would spend on a single painting during the three years he resided in Paris as Ambassador without Portfolio – “sans caractère” – between July 1739…
The Triumph of Venus was one of three paintings of the same dimensions, each signed and dated “1740,” that Boucher exhibited at the Salon of 1740, which took place in the Louvre that year between August 22 and September 15. This unusually triptych comprised, in addition, a pair of landscapes painted for another discriminating collector, the fermier-général Marin de La Haye: the View of a Mill with Distant Temple (Fig. 4), and Forest Scene with Two Roman Soldiers (Fig. 5). We know that Boucher’s three paintings were installed together, but not the order in which they were hung. And although Boucher had been at work on Tessin’s Triumph of Venus since the early summer (at least), he had yet to receive payment when he delivered the picture to the Salon. Tessin’s name does not appear as the owner of this painting in the livret, although the Swedish Ambassador was represented at the Salon by two other significant commissions: Aved’s portrait of him in his library (Fig. 6) and Oudry’s portrait of his beloved dachshund, Pehr (Fig. 7). To be absolutely secure in his ownership, perhaps, Tessin remitted payment to the artist four days after the Salon opened its doors.

Boucher’s Birth of Venus – as it was entitled at the Salon of 1740 – shows Venus, the goddess of love, on a glorious summer’s day, emerging fully formed from the ocean. She is portrayed with a blush of red on her cheeks, pearls entwined in her hair, and her snow-white body is untouched by water. Seated on her carriage of a magnificent shell covered in white silk and a swath of powder blue, she is surrounded by no fewer than twenty-one attendants: eleven putti (nine airborne), an escort of four tritons – one of whom holds her conveyance steady – five Nereids, beautiful, melodious sea-nymphs who could be helpful and kind to sailors, and a junior, conch-blowing triton, who is just visible in the waves at far left. Also depicted are five doves and three dolphins.

Serene amidst this jubilant and noisy celebration, Venus is shaded from the sun by a swirling canopy of pink and white silk, held aloft by three of the gamboling putti. A red-haired Nereid, supported by a muscular Triton with seaweed dripping from his head – inspired, perhaps, by a sculpture such as Giambologna’s Hercules and Antaeus (Fig. 8) – offers the goddess a shell filled with pearls. In the foreground, her companions disport themselves in languorous and voluptuous poses. The male and female sea deities are unabashed in their nudity, and here Boucher may have derived inspiration from Bernini’s magnificent Triton fountain in Rome.

The Nereid at left is shown with her head resting against the dolphin’s tail: her eyes
are closed and her finger caresses the dove’s neck. She is one of the most carnal figures in Boucher’s repertory, rendered with unprecedented abandon, and will reappear a decade and a half later as the ecstatic Venus in Mars and Venus Surprised by Vulcan c. 1754 (Wallace Collection, London). It is not altogether surprising that a contemporary review of the Triumph of Venus noted the painting’s “excessive grace, which strict morality does not permit us to encourage.” Surprisingly, this was the single extended commentary on the painting in the art press at the time.

Most unusually for him, Boucher appears to have worked on Tessin’s Triumph of Venus with a minimum of preparation. The composition may be said to have emerged, Athena-like, from his head. In fact, it was Boucher’s custom to plot the creation of his history paintings meticulously through compositional studies in oil or chalk, followed by preparatory drawings for individual figures, which might focus on facial expression, heads, or details of drapery. For example, we can consider an earlier treatment of this same theme, the Birth of Venus (Fig. 9) painted around 1732–33 as part of a decorative series done for a Parisian lawyer, François Derbais. Today this magnificent work is part of the interior of the Romanian Embassy in Paris (the Hôtel de Béhague on the rue Saint-Dominique). We note how carefully Boucher prepared two of the Nereids in red and black chalk nude studies, possibly drawn from the live model (Fig. 10).

For another painting in the same series, the Rape of Europa in the Wallace Collection, London, we have a sketch in grisaille showing a more animated Jupiter as the Bull who is impatient to lure the innocent Princess of Tyre to the ocean.

Fig. 6 Jacques-André-Joseph Aved (1702–1766), Portrait of Count Carl Gustaf Tessin, 1740. Oil on canvas, 149 x 116 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NM 5535.

Fig. 7 Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686-1755), The Dachshund Pehr with Dead Game and Rifle, 1740. Oil on canvas, 135 x 109 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NM 864.
And one later example from the 1750s: Boucher prepared his Venus Requesting Vulcan to make Arms for Aeneas, a model for a Gobelins Tapestry cartoon, in both a grisaille compositional sketch and in a sketch in full colors.

Hardly any such preparations exist for Tessin’s Triumph of Venus. We know of an oil-sketch – which has yet to reappear – described in April 1786 as a first thought for the painting at the sale of Boucher’s patron, the financier Pierre-Jacques Bergeret de Grandcourt (1715–1785). With an eye to recording and possibly replicating this commission – which he never seems to have done – Boucher etched the Triumph of Venus himself, in all likelihood before the painting left Paris for Stockholm (via Rouen) in August 1741. At least two examples of Boucher’s etching are recorded: one retouched in black and white chalks by him, another in graphite and white chalks by the engraver Charles-Nicolas Cochin. Neither of these survives, but they must have served as the model for Pierre-Etienne Moitte’s engraving of Venus on the Waters, presented to the Académie Royale as his morceau de réception in June 1760 (Fig. 13). Since Tessin had shipped his picture home in the summer of 1741, Moitte presumably had access to an excellent record of the painting to engrave such a faithful reproduction twenty years later.

Just as surprisingly, only two drawings by Boucher have as yet been identified that may be considered in any sense preparatory for the Triumph of Venus. Boucher’s Triton (Fig. 11), a vigorous study in three crayons, shows a male nude bearing aloft a partially draped figure of indeterminate sex. While the pose of this figure is identical to that of the Triton at far right in Boucher’s painting, the drawing appears to have originated as a study of a satyr, whose tufted hindquarters and bestial expression find no place in Boucher’s marine mythology. Perrin Stein has graciously drawn my attention to the Head of a Child (Fig. 12) in the Nationalmuseum of Stockholm, a drawing acquired by Tessin from Boucher but catalogued as by Natoire by his nephew, Fredrik Sparre in 1790 (an attribution that remained
Fig. 10 François Boucher (1703–1770), *Reclining Female Nude*, c. 1732. Red and white chalk on oatmeal paper, 310 x 246 mm. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Fig. 11 François Boucher (1703–1770), *Triton*, 1740. Black, red and white chalk on light brown paper, 295 x 230 mm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NMH 60/2017.

Fig. 12 François Boucher (1703–1770), *Head of a child*, 1740. Red and white chalk, 128 x 109 mm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NMH 2924/1863.

Fig. 13 Pierre Etienne Moitte (1722–1780), after François Boucher, *Venus on the Waters*, 1760. Etching, 534 x 665 mm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-P-OB-63.312.

Fig. 14 Infrared reflectogram of François Boucher (1703–1770), *The Triumph of Venus*, 1740. Oil on canvas, 130 x 162 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NM 770.

Fig. 15 François Boucher (1703–1770), *The Triumph of Venus*, 1740 (detail). Oil on canvas, 130 x 162 cm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NM 770.
unchallenged until 1984). This red and white chalk drawing served to prepare the heads of the two putti cavorting in the foreground of *The Triumph of Venus*. For the putto floating on his back at left—who has longer hair, redder cheeks, and a more jovial expression—Boucher would have rotated his study forty-five degrees to the right to provide the appropriate angle. The head of the putto resting on drapery behind the nereid who poses on the dolphin in the right foreground of the composition is also based on this drawing. This time, the putto in the drawing and the painting share the same coiffure, although Boucher has once again changed the infant’s expression. Other drawings that have been identified as preparatory for Boucher’s *Triumph of Venus* are in fact autonomous, independent sheets, made after certain figures and groups in the painting and that served as models for engravings.

Technical examination also confirms the assurance and fluency with which Boucher created this complex, sophisticated composition. Recent infrared reflectography has revealed almost no significant revisions or alterations (Fig. 14). Such was his fastidiousness that Boucher painted out the three flying putti at upper left, only to return them to the picture in its final version. He also suppressed the dove he had placed behind Venus’s right hand; with a little effort, it can still be made out by the naked eye, emerging from the clouds behind. From X-radiography, we discover a single important alteration. The sea nymph on the far right, seen from behind, was initially portrayed fully immersed in the ocean’s foamy waves (Fig. 16). Boucher’s decision to expose her ample waist and buttocks was consistent with the unapologetic carnality of this mythological painting (Fig. 15).

Examination of the back of the canvas, miraculously unlined and still on its original strainer, reveals further information of interest and provides a fascinating glimpse into Boucher’s studio practice. A recently discovered inscription indicates that a certain “Soldani” was to be paid “10 deniers (?),” most likely for priming the canvas for the master (Fig. 17).

Carl Gustaf Tessin was among the best-travelled, most visually sophisticated connoisseurs and collectors to have made Boucher’s acquaintance. The son and grandson of court architects and the husband of Ulrika Lovisa Sparre (1711–
1768) – a god-daughter to Louis XIV and one of the wealthiest heiresses in Sweden – Tessin was rich, profligate, fluent in several languages, an able draughtsman and designer, and deeply interested in the history of art. As a young man, in his early twenties between July 1714 and September 1720 he had spent almost six years abroad on an extended Grand Tour in preparation for succeeding his father as Court Architect and Surintendant des Bâtiments. Tessin had been charged with acquiring prints, drawings and books to supplement his father’s extensive collection, which he would inherit in 1728. In the summer of 1715, he befriended the thirty-year-old Watteau (1684–1721), and three years later acquired examples of his most audacious drawings. During his honey-moon visit to Paris with his seventeen-year-old bride, Ulla, in the winter of 1728–29, he made superb acquisitions of cabinet paintings by Nicolas Lancret, François Lemoyne and Noël-Nicolas Coypel – the leading lights of the French School. Neither Boucher nor Chardin was prominent enough at this time to come to Tessin’s attention. During his ambassadorship in Vienna he also became an early enthusiast of Giambattista Tiepolo (1696–1770), whom he had hoped to lure to Stockholm in 1736. As he did Oudry
and Pater. None of these artists accepted his offer.26

Tessin seems to have first taken note of François Boucher in May 1737. His banker and agent in Paris, Henry Barrisch of Barrisch, Massman et Co., wrote with rather disappointing news that month: "I have been with M. Boucher, the painter, inquiring about the little painting that your Excellency wished for, but when I told him my price he would not listen. It would require at least 300 livres to commission him to work on a subject as you would like. He is a very busy young man, working all the time for the King and Court, and he is so convinced of his own ability and so much in demand, that he counts himself among the most famous; to be truthful, in Paris today, he is considered one of the greatest." 27

The two men would meet for the first time just over two years later, within days of Tessin’s arriving in Paris on 30 July 1739 with his wife, his niece, Lotta, his nephew Frederik, and a secretary Baron Carl Frederick Scheffer. On 3 August Tessin was introduced to Boucher in his studio by Gustaf Lundberg, the Swedish pastelist and portrait painter then resident in Paris.28 In September of that year, Tessin made his first acquisition from Boucher, a Woman with a Parrot in grisaille, for 100 livres (Fig. 18).29 Along with Woman Applying a Mouche (Private collection), that also entered his collection, these were early works, and not painted expressly for Tessin.30 During his three-year sojourn in Paris, Tessin commissioned several masterpieces from Boucher, most of a libertine, erotic nature, as well as many drawings. He commissioned a tender portrait drawing in three crayons of his niece Charlotta Sparre (Fig. 19) in exchange for a pair of small cabinet paintings by Isaac Ostade.31

In March 1742, Tessin acquired a wintry landscape by Wouvermanns from Boucher.
— himself an avid collector — for 350 livres. At some point before the summer of 1741, Tessin had also bought a pair of clay sculptures by Boucher — modele rade figure — representing “A shoeshine boy and a Savoyard woman in a headscarf” (Fig. 20). This is the single visual record we have of Boucher’s activity as a sculptor.

Soon after arriving in Paris, Tessin gave a reading in his Salon of Faunil laune, a fairy tale written in 1738 to relieve the boredom of attending the annual session of the Riksdag. Among the luminaries in attendance were the connoisseur and arbiter of the arts, the comte de Caylus, the writer Marivaux and the painter Boucher. Tessin went on to commission Boucher to illustrate a luxury edition of this tale with ten drawings (Fig. 21). Only three copies of the book were printed, and Tessin hung Boucher’s drawings, framed and glazed, in his bedchamber. He would leave them as a gift to the artist when he returned to Stockholm in the summer of 1742.

In the 1760s, it was widely rumored in Paris that Tessin had commissioned Boucher to illustrate this fairy tale so that he could visit the painter in the company of his beautiful wife, Marie-Jeanne Buseau, with whom, it was claimed, he was infatuated. As another noble patron of Boucher’s wrote in the following decade, “Madame Boucher was not just the most beautiful woman in Paris, but in the whole of France...and was as virtuous as she was beautiful, making herself generally loved and esteemed.” Tessin and Boucher had both married wives who were half their age; both seem to have been uxorious and to have enjoyed long and happy marriages. It is nonetheless true that Tessin commissioned a portrait in pastel from Boucher of Marie-Jeanne Buseau, made her gifts of a silk dress and a snuff box, and invited her to perform at his home, where she apparently sung like an angel.

“Poor Boucher and his beautiful wife” were among those, who, with tears in their eyes, sent their regards to Tessin in February 1745, asking when they might be allowed to visit him in Stockholm.

The Triumph of Venus was thus an exceptional painting for an exceptional...
Whereas 17th-century mythographers had portrayed Venus as the goddess of voluptuousness and luxury, the source of mankind’s concupiscence, and of “discordant and lascivious desires,” by the first decades of the 18th century there was an established iconographical tradition – sensuous rather than censori-
Boucher would also have known Poussin’s *Triumph of Venus* of 1635–36 (Fig. 24), itself indebted to Raphael, and one of the most surpassingly beautiful marine mythologies in French art. Neptune’s billowing blue cloak seems to have found its way onto the seating of Venus’s chariot in Boucher’s composition. While Boucher undoubtedly would have had access to Jean Pesne’s engraving after Poussin’s composition (Fig. 25) it is quite possible that he had studied the picture *in situ* as well. Recent research has shown that in the 1730s and early 1740s, Poussin’s *Triumph of Venus* – then thought to represent the Triumph of Galatea – was part of the gallery of paintings owned by the immensely wealthy financier Antoine Crozat (1655–1738) elder brother to the banker Pierre Crozat, known as Crozat the Poor and his wife Marguerite Legendre-Crozat (d. 1742). In the probate inventory taken after Legendre-Crozat’s death in September 1742 is listed a “Triumph” by Poussin, valued at 1,000 *livres*, hanging in the Gallery of her hôtel on the place Vendôme. In her will, written a week before her death, Legendre-Crozat left the lion’s share of her collection to the youngest of her four children, Louis-Antoine Crozat, baron de Thiers (1699–1770). Boucher was well acquainted with this family. He had designed a bookplate for de Thiers, and in the year that he was working on Tessin’s *Triumph of Venus* he was commissioned by de Thiers’s elder brother, Joseph-Antoine Crozat, président de Tugny, to paint a small ceiling for the library of his hôtel, of which no trace survives.

Raphael and Poussin’s examples had also informed Boucher’s earlier *Birth of Venus*, painted around 1732–33 (see Fig. 9). Almost twice the size of Tessin’s picture, this marine mythology is dominated by the serpentine figure of the standing goddess, keeping her balance amid a triad of fleshy Nereids and fero-

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57. For a detailed account of the formation of the collection, see R. de Salgues, *Histoire et description du Musée Crozat de Toulouse* (Paris, 1852, 1st ed., 1837). The inventory indicates the presence of Poussin’s *Triumph of Venus* as early as 1737, but it is not known if it was in the collection of Antoine Crozat. In any event, the inventory also notes the presence of *Tessin’s* picture in the same year. This also served for the related marine mythologies of the Triumph of Galatea, and Neptune and Amphitrite. Academicians of the prior generations to Boucher’s treated these subjects in generally static, multi-figured compositions containing several variations of the female nude. In preparing his *Triumph of Venus* for Tessin, Boucher looked to the same visual sources as they had: notably Raphael’s *Triumph of Galatea* of 1512 from the Loggia di Galatea in the Villa Farnesina in Rome. Boucher must have seen this mural decoration during the years he spent in Rome as an unofficial pensionnaire of the Academy. He would also have known the composition from Marcantonio Raimondi’s engraving after Raphael (Fig. 23). The latter print had been one of the trophies of Tessin’s father’s collection: the count clutches it, in a manner that would be unacceptable today, in Aved’s portrait of him shown at the Salon of 1740 (see Fig. 6).
inspired Lancret’s unusually monumental Fastening the Skate (Fig. 27), acquired for 400 livres from the artist in July 1741. At the very least, as patron Tessin would have had a say in the subject matter and the size of Boucher’s composition.

A more potent influence on Boucher’s multifigured Birth of Venus was Noël-Nicolas Coypel’s radiant Rape of Europa (Fig. 26) – one of the outstanding entries to the concours de 1727, a competition among senior history painters held in the Louvre, which Boucher in his mid-twenties had likely seen. While their subjects are not the same, both works share essential characteristics: an open composition, dynamic groupings, a pleasure in naturalistic effects and the crystalline finish appropriate for cabinet pictures. Whether Coypel’s masterpiece was available to Boucher in the summer of 1740 is difficult to ascertain; it had not been engraved.

What role, if any, did Tessin himself play in the gestation and development of Boucher’s masterpiece? Writing a couple of decades later, Denis Diderot – no friend of Boucher’s – described the model patron of contemporary art in the following way: “One should never commission anything from an artist. If one wants a fine painting from him, all that needs to be done is to say, ‘Make me a painting and choose whatever subject you wish.’ An even better way is to buy one that is already painted.”

This was most certainly not the case for Tessin and Boucher. In a letter of late July 1740 to the architect Carl Hårleman, his correspondent in Stockholm, Tessin stated quite explicitly that Boucher was doing a Birth of Venus for him: “Boucher me fait une naissance (sic) de Venus.” As patron, he would have expected to have a say, at the very least, in the subject matter and size of Boucher’s composition. With regard to the portraitist Gustaf Lundberg, he explained in a letter to Lovisa Ulrika in August 1745, “I am a man of ideas, Lundberg is a man of talent. I will tell him which emblems he is to paint, he will paint them. I will dictate, he will immortalize.” One shudders to think of Tessin conversing with Boucher or Chardin in this way, although instructions of this sort may have inspired Lancret’s unusually monumental Fastening the Skate (Fig. 27), acquired for 400 livres from the artist in July 1741.

At the very least, as patron Tessin would have had a say in the subject matter and the size of Boucher’s composition. As Magnus Olausson has recently noted, the count had a firm sense of his role in the “creative process” – to use a somewhat anachronistic term. A recently discovered letter from the history painter François Lemoyne to Tessin, dated 17 January 1729 – during the count’s previous visit to Paris – establishes that Tessin, as patron, expected to be kept informed on the progress of his commissions, by word or by letter. “J’ay disposé la pensée de vostre tableau,” writes Lemoyne; “Je le ferai en hauteur, les figures devenans de plus grandes, cela sera de plus grande ma-
sioned as a pendant to Noël-Nicolas Coypel’s *Judgement of Paris*, signed and dated 1728. Both were appropriate subjects to celebrate the count’s recent nuptials to Ulrika Lovisa Sparre.61

It is most likely that Tessin commissioned Boucher’s *Triumph of Venus* in the spring or summer of 1740. In July of that year he had been tempted to purchase Poussin’s magisterial pendants *The Adoration of the Golden Calf* (National Gallery, London) and *The Crossing of the Red Sea* (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne), 1633–34, when they were offered for sale after the death of Toussaint Bellanger (1662–1740) Trésorier général du sceau de France. To Hårleman he wrote on 22 July: “My heart bleeds to see all those fine pictures in the deceased Monsieur de Bellanger’s collection being sold at auction, among which are two of the most beautiful Poussins imaginable. You know them from the prints…They fetched 7,900 livres for the pair, and the frames alone are worth 3,000 livres… The good Lord made it possible for me to resist this time, but it is a harsh setback for my ‘Picturemania.’”62

At this point, the Ambassador was living in a “hovel” – “un taudis,” his word – on the rue Jacob.63 In mid-July 1740, while Boucher was at work on the painting, Tessin and his entourage moved into the eleganthôtel de Villemur on the quai des Théatins opposite the Louvre, which he had rented for the considerable sum of 8,500 livres per annum.64 From Tessin’s correspondence, we learn that Boucher was still working on his *Triumph of Venus* on 22 July, but that the composition must have been fairly advanced by then. After a visit to Boucher’s studio that day, Tessin reported to Hårleman: “Cospetto! Che bella cosa! Only eyes like yours are worthy of seeing it!”65 Boucher’s mythology would have pride of place in Tessin’s bedchamber in the hôtel de Villemur until it was shipped back to Stockholm in August 1741.66 However, it was likely

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Fig. 30 Beauvais manufactory, after cartoon painted by François Boucher (1703–1770), *Psyche’s arrival at Cupid’s Palace*, c. 1745–47. Wool and silk, 336.5 x 610.9 cm. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Fig. 31 Claude Augustin Duflos le Jeune, after François Boucher (1703–1770), *Rocaille*, c. 1737. Etching with engraving, 49.8 x 25 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 53.600.1086.
commissioned to hang in a prominent place in the first-floor picture gallery of the Tessinska palatset at Slottsbacken (Fig. 28), the townhouse built in 1697 by Tessin’s father opposite the Royal Palace, where Tessin and Ulla had resided since 1728.

In considering the subject of Boucher’s painting, Tessin may have recalled his father’s commission to Antoine Coypel for a Birth of Venus in 1699. This cabinet picture was intended for the seventeen-year-old King Karl XII, who was “of an age to prefer the graceful to the serious.” For almost one year, between June 1699 and May 1700, Tessin’s father had corresponded with the architect Daniel Cronström who was resident in Paris to secure a painting from the thirty-eight-year-old history painter Antoine Coypel. From a short-list of sixteen possible subjects, artist and patron had finally settled upon three, ultimately choosing the “amiable and graceful” subject of the Birth of Venus.67 In the end, nothing came of the project, but Coypel’s preparatory black and red chalk compositional drawing (Fig. 29), sent from Paris to Stockholm for royal approval, had entered Tessin’s collection after the death of his father. This was a drawing that Carl Gustaf had known for a long time.68 In the course of Nicodemus Tessin’s commission to Antoine Coypel, he had been informed that Cronström and Coypel were “going to read carefully the authors who have treated the three

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Fig. 32 Pierre Quentin Chedel, after François Boucher, Frontispiece, for A.J. Dézallier d’Argenville, Histoire naturelle éclaircie dans deux de ses parties principales: la lithologie et la conchyliologie… Paris: Chez de Bure l’aîné, 1742. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, PML 151344.

Fig. 33 Porcelaines (plate 21), in A. J. Dézallier d’Argenville, Histoire naturelle éclaircie dans deux de ses parties principales: la lithologie et la conchyliologie… Paris: Chez de Bure l’aîné, 1742. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York, PML 151344.
Fig. 34 Olof Frödsberg (1728–1795), *Cabinet of the Countess Ulla Tessin at Åkerö*, 1763. Watercolor on parchment, 220 x 170 mm. Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NMH 145/1960.

Fig. 35 Olof Frödsberg (1728–1795), *Corner Cupboard*, 1762. Åkerö Manor.
subjects under consideration, and then we
will make our choice.” It is possible that
Tassin fils and Boucher followed a similar
path in 1740.

A month after arriving in Paris, Tassin
would most likely have visited the Salon
of 1739, held that year between 6 and
30 September in the Louvre. This would
have been his first exposure to paintings
by Chardin and Boucher. The Salon was
dominated by Boucher’s monumental
cartoon for a tapestry for the Beauvais
manufactury, showing the inaugural scene
in the Story of Psyche, in which Zephyr
ushers Psyche into Cupid’s Palace (Fig.
30). Boucher would work on the remain-
ing four cartoons during Tessin’s sojourn
in Paris, and in the mid-1740s, through
the intermediary of Oudry, Tassin ordered
a set of this series for the Royal Palace at
a cost of 8,835 livres; they remain in situ
today.

Boucher had undertaken the tapestry
commission for Beauvais with the utmost
seriousness of purpose, applying to the
respected connoisseur and arbiter of taste,
Louis Petit de Bachaumont, for assistance
with the literary and historical aspects of
the series. Bachaumont was in no doubt
as to the sources that Boucher should
consult: “For the love of you, I have re-
read La Fontaine’s Cupid and Psyche. You
are a lucky Apelles to have a flesh and
blood Psyche living with you… You should
also consult Raphael’s Psyche, engraved
by Marc Antonio Raimondi, which can be
found in either M. Crozat or M. Mariette’s
collection… But my best advice is to read
and re-read the Psyche of Lafontaine, and
above all, look long and hard at Madame
Boucher.”

La Fontaine’s Les Amours de Psyche et
de Cupidon, first published in 1669, was
republished nine times between 1700 and
1728. It brought Apuleius’s Golden Ass up
to date, and followed a similar narrative.
In both works, the description of the
Triumph of Venus is but a short interlude
in the story of Psyche’s endless trials.
Apuleius and La Fontaine both describe
Venus’s return to Cythera after she secures
a promise from Cupid to avenge her by
making Psyche fall in love with a “vagrant
wretch, frightful in face.” This part of the
story, La Fontaine writes, is properly a
subject for poetry: “Twould ill become
Prose to attempt the description of a
Cavalcade of Sea Gods.” John Lockman’s
English translation, The Loves of Cupid and
Psyche, published in London in 1744, was
dedicated to the Academician Fontenelle,
one of Tassin’s heroes and friends in
Paris.

“In Verse we’ll therefore tell, that
Neptune’s Train/See her, with Transport, gild
the liquid Plain.
Th'august Procession Tritons head, with Joy/
And, to divert her, all their Skill employ.
Some round her sport, for Coral others haste,/Or draw new Treasures from the wert’ry Waste.
One holds a Glass, in which her Beauty plays;/Another screens her from the solar Rays.
Her Guide, Palaemon, shuns each Rock with
Care, / Whilft Glaucus’ Shell loud echoes thro’
the Air.
Syrens, by Thetis call’d, delight her Ear;/The Winds, to Silence charm’d, can only hear.
All but Favonius, who breathes am’rous Sighs/
Round the bright Queen, and through each
Ringlet flies.
Whilst in her fluttering Veil he seems to dance,/To touch her, Waves o’er heaving Waves
advance:
Each joyful Surge, in Murmurs, strives to greet/
The smiling Goddess, and to kiss her Feet.”

Having been immersed in this literary
source for his tapestry series for Beauvais,
it is not hard to imagine Boucher’s visual
imagination – and Tessin’s as well – being
stirred by La Fontaine’s poetic description
of Venus’s noisy and jubilant return
home. A later passage in La Fontaine’s
tale offered a second image that might
also have served. Psyche comes across the
exquisite Temple built in honor of Venus,
whose tympanum is decorated with figures
sculpted in high relief. This passage is
rendered in prose, not verse: “Venus was
seated on a Shell, in the Attitude of a
Person who had been bathing and was just
emerging from the Water.” She is attended
by graces, mermaids, zephyrs, and putti.
“For Venus rose at her birth with her whole
Equipage. She then appeared of proper
Stature, completely formed: quite ripe for
receiving and giving Love.”

“Completely formed, quite ripe for
receiving and giving love.” Boucher’s
revival of a pictorial tradition established
by Raphael and Poussin – and a classical
literary tradition reanimated by La Fontai-
ne – was in many ways distinctly modern
and Parisian in resonance as well. For in
his recreation of a mythical Cythera and
its presiding goddess for Count Tessin,
Boucher’s imagination was also stirred by
the new language of rococo ornament, of
which he was one of the prime movers,
and by the taste for shells and natural
curiosities that together came to dominate
delte culture in Paris (and beyond) in the
late 1730s and 1740s.

From the mid-1730s, Boucher was
the only history painter of the Académie
Royale to participate in the formation of
a new language of ornament and interior
decoration, the organic and asymmetrical
style known as rocaille. Boucher’s flam-
boyant and fanciful designs for fountains,
panels, and screens incorporated sea
deities and marine creatures, as well as a
dazzling array of shells, incrustations, sea
fans, and aquatic flora and fauna (Fig. 31).
This was the world to which he gave poetic
form, as a history painter, in the Triumph of
Venus.

At the same time, Boucher’s services
were in demand to illustrate both commer-
cial and scholarly compendia devoted to
natural curiosities: by the 1760s, the artist
would have assembled one of the finest
cabinets of shells and natural history in
Paris. Boucher’s frontispiece for
Dessler d’Argenville’s treatise on sea shells
and shell collecting, L’Histoire Naturelle…
de La Lithologie et de la Conchyliologie,
published in 1742, derived from Tessin’s
Triumph of Venus (Fig. 32). Tessin himself
was a shell collector, who had inherited an
important collection from his father. Like
many advanced patrons and collectors in Paris at this time, Tessin was also a subscriber to Dezallier d’Argenville’s treatise, whose frontispiece, as noted, was designed by Boucher. Plate 21 of this publication, devoted to Porcelain, was sponsored by “Mr le Comte de Tessin” (Fig. 33).80

In the 1750s, Tessin was obliged to sell most of the paintings and drawings he had acquired during his ambassadorship in Paris, including Boucher’s Triumph of Venus. Yet Boucher’s rococo language remained constantly before him in his final years. In retirement in his country house at Åkerö, Tessin decorated his wife’s Petit Cabinet with a trompe l’œil executed by Olof Fridsberg (Fig. 34).81 Along with Tessin, Boucher presides in this space. His two sculptures adorn the secrétaire. His calling card for Gersaint, engraved by the comte de Caylus, is writ large upon the cornet cupboard. But when we look at this trompe l’œil door in its entirety, something not possible in Fridsberg’s watercolor, we see what must have greeted something not possible in Fridsberg’s cornet cupboard. But when we look with Tessin, Boucher presides in this spa final years. In retirement in his country remained constantly before him in his had acquired during his ambassadorship and drawings he sold most of the paintings and drawings he march, stepping forth, and ready for the boucher for mahlungen och raman.” (1,600 livres: Boucher, for the painting, and the frame). I am grateful to Merit Laine and the staff of the National Archives for facilitating access to Tessin’s account books.7. Magnus Olaussson, “Count Tessin, Mariette and the Crozat Sale,” Art Bulletin of Nationalmuseum Stockholm, 19 (2012), pp. 145–156. 8. Alastair Laing ed., François Boucher, 1703–1770, (exh. cat.), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Detroit Institute of Arts, and Galeries du Grand Palais, Paris 1986–87; pp. 183–187. I am greatly indebted to Alastair Laing for making available his unpublished entry on Boucher’s Triumph of Venus, prepared in 1986 for the monographic exhibition in New York, Detroit and Paris. 9. Treasures from the Nationalmuseum of Sweden, (note 1), pp. 44–45, 66–67. 10. Explication des Peintures, Sculptures, et autres ouvrages…dans le grand Salon du Louvre, Paris 1740, p. 8, no. 9. The description in the livraison is as follows: “Un Tableau en largeur…représentant la naissance de Vénus, où cette Déesse paroit sortir du sein des Eaux avec les Graces, accompagnée des Tritons, des Nereides, & des Amours.” 11. Stephen Duffy and Jo Hedley, The Wallace Collection’s Pictures. A Complete Catalogue, London 2004, pp. 42–44. 12. Pierre-François Gout Desfontaines, “Explication des Peintures de l’Académie,” in Observations sur les écrits modernes, 22 (1740), p. 283. “Il y a dans le Tableau de M. Boucher, représentant la naissance de Vénus, trop de graces, que la Morale sévère ne permet de vanter.” 13. On the painting and related drawings see Alastair Laing, “La Re-Naissance de Vénus: une œuvre des débuts de Boucher retrouvé à Paris,” Revue de l’art, 103 (1994), pp. 77–81; William Breazeale ed., Pioneering Collection: Master Drawings of the Crozat Art Museum, Sacramento and London 2010, pp. 112–114 (entry by Cara Denison). 14. Laing 1786–87 (note 8), pp. 157–160. 15. Ibid., pp. 272–276. 16. Pontus Grate, French Paintings II: Eighteenth Century, Stockholm 1994, pp. 55–56. 17. Pierre Lespinasse, L’art français et la Sûreté de 1673 à 1816, Paris 1913, p. 143. 18. As Laing noted in his unpublished entry (note 8), “There seems little doubt that it was from this etching, as corrected by both Boucher and Cochlin, and as recorded in a fair copy by the engraver Liottard, that Moitte produced his final engraving.” See Pierre Remy, Catalogue de Tableaux des Trois Écoles...du Cabinet de MM. (Sorbet), 1 April 1776, Paris, nos. 87–89, where listed among the “Desseins montés sous verre” are two versions of Boucher’s etching of Vénus sur les eaux, the first retouched by Boucher himself (“retouchée à la pierre noire, estompée, et rehaussée de blanc”), the second by Cochlin (“retouchée à la mine de plomb et au blanc.”). Also listed is a copy by Jean-Michel Liottard, described as “dessinée à la pierre noire et rehaussée de blanc.” 19. Boucher’s drawing in three chalks, formerly in the William and Bernadette Berger collection and recently acquired by the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, does not represent a marine deity; there is no sign of seaweed in the figure’s hair. See Sotheby’s, London, 5 July 2017, no. 70. My thanks again to Alastair Laing for alerting me to this drawing. 20. Perrin Stein, in e-mail communication with the author, dated 5 May 2017. On this drawing and a second, related Head of a Child, see Per Bjurström, French Drawings: Eighteenth Century, Stockholm 1982, nos. 1067, 1068. In fact, in 1749 Tessin catalogued both drawings as by Boucher in his Catalogue manuscrit de la collection de dessins de Tessin (Archives of the Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, CGT 1:3): They are listed in section 17, devoted to Têtes et Portraits; “no. 290, Tête d’enfant regardant en bas, au crayon rouge” (NM 1067), and “no. 292, Tête d’enfant, ayant la bouche ouverte, au crayon rouge” (“NM 1068). An attribution to Boucher was advanced by Pierre Rosenberg, following a suggestion by Jean-Pierre Cuzin, in his review of Bjurström’s catalogue in Master Drawings, vol. 22, no. 1 (Spring 1984), pp. 68–69. The drawings were also rejected as Natoire by Susanna Caviglia-Bruneau, Charles-Joseph Natoire, 1700–1777, Paris 2012, p. 517 (DR 69, 70), who also proposed a tentative attribution to Boucher. 21. Alexandre Ananoff, with Daniel Wildenstein, François Boucher, Lausanne, 2 vols., 1976, vol. 1, pp. 236–298; Grate, French Paintings II: Eighteenth Century (note 16), p. 54; Pierrette Jean-Richard, L’oeuvre gravé de François Boucher dans la Collection Edmond de Rothschild, Paris 1978, nos. 236, 237, 1466. The two engravings in Huquier’s Premier Livre de Gravures d’Enfant replicate two groups of putti in The Triumph of Venus. Petit’s crayon manner engraving, Néréide sur un dauphin, after a drawing in Montullé’s collection, is based on – but not preparatory for – the Nereid reclining on the
dolphin in the left foreground of the composition. Her profile, coiffure and the positioning of her thigh are not the same as in Boucher’s painting; nor does the engraving show the bracelet of pearls on her left wrist.

22. I am most grateful to Lena Dahlén and her colleagues in the Conservation Department at the Nationalmuseum for sharing the results of their recent technical examination of the painting with me. This corrects the slight inaccuracy in Grate, French Paintings II: Eighteenth Century p. 54, (note 16), where he writes that the change was made “to the Nereid reclining on a dolphin to the left.”

23. The literature on Tessin, especially in Swedish, is immense. For a good introduction, see the bibliography for Magnus Olausson’s essays in Treasures from the Nationalmuseum of Sweden (note 1). Most useful for this essay have been Roger-Armand Weigert and Carl Hermarck, Les Relations Artistiques entre la France et la Suède, 1693–1718, Nicodem Tessin le jeune et Daniel Cronström, Stockholm 1964; Gunnar von Proschwitz ed., Tableaux de Paris et de la Cour de France, 1739–1742; letters inédites de Carl Gustaf, comte de Tessin, Paris 1983; Per Bjureström and Mårten Snickare ed., Nicodemus Tessin the Younger: Sources, Works, Collections, Nationalmuseum Stockholm 2000.

24. Pierre Rosenberg and Louis-Antoine Prat, Antoine Watteau 1684–1721: Catalogue raisonné des dessins, 3 vols., Milan 1966. Among the 45 drawings by Watteau that Tessin owned were 27 counterproofs acquired at the time of his first encounter with the artist in June 1715. He may have owned as many as three of the audacious female nude drawings made in 1718, likely bought directly from Watteau during Tessin’s second sojourn in Paris in the winter of 1718–19.

25. Treasures from the Nationalmuseum of Sweden (note 1), pp. 17–18, 40–51.


31. Tessin Collection (note 6), vol. 2, 8 April 1741, “2 small paintings by Ostade which I gave to Boucher for the portrait of Lotta Sparre, 144 livres.”


33. Tessin Collections (note 6), vol. 2, General Inventarium, hôtel de Villemur, Quai des Thésour, 5 August 1741, “My Bedchamber...a model figure (modelecade figure) by Boucher, representing Un décorateur et Un Savoyard and marmotte, 72 livres.” These painted terracotta sculptures were placed on top of the armoire-secrétaire in the comtesse Tessin’s Petit Cabinet in their house in Åkerö; see Olof Fritsberg’s precious watercolour in Un Suédois à Paris au 18e siècle: La collection Tessin (note 32), pp. 220–227.


35. Carl Gustaf Tessin, Faunillaune, ou L’infante jaune, Paris, Chez les Frères Pouthomes, 1741. For the reference to Boucher’s ten preparatory drawings, which do not survive, see Tessin Collection (note 6), vol. 2, General Inventarium, hôtel de Villemur, 5 August 1741, “My Bedchamber...10 drawings by Boucher for Faunillaune, gilt frame and glass, 100 livres.”


40. Von Proschwitz, Tableaux de Paris (note 23), p. 34.


44. Carl Gustaf Tessin, Letters from an Old Man to a Young Prince, London 1759, p. 148. Tessin’s letter was written at Ulrichsdahl on 1 June 1751.


47. As “la Deesse de volupté & luxe,” Venus had been responsible for having “envoyé au coeur des hommes, des desirs & affections desordonnées & lascives.” The human soul “tire de Venus l’appetit de concupiscence, qui l’induit à luxure, & aux desirs lascifs,” Vincent Cartari, Les Images des Dieux des Anciens, Tournon 1606, pp. 756–757. In the Iconologie it was explained that Venus was shown nude “soit pour représenter l’ardeur violante des plaisirs lascifs, soit pour faire voir que ceux qui s’y adonnent sont entierement dépouillée par elle-même de biens et d’honneurs,” Cesare Ripa, Iconologie, ou Explication nouvelle de plusieurs images, emblèmes, et autres figures hyérogliphiques, Paris 1644, p. 195.

48. In a letter of 25 July 1716 commending Carl Gustaf’s acquisitions of prints and drawings in Paris, Nicodemus Tessin the Younger reminded his son that he was fortunate to own a copy of “la Galathée de Marc Antoine dont Mariette demande 1000 livres,” see Bjureström and Snickare 2000 (note 23), pp. 205–206.


51. Ibid., p. 116. Maddeningly, the inventory of Legendre-Crozat’s pictures, drawn up on 12 September 1742 by Tessin’s portraitist, Jacques André Joseph Aved, listed this painting as “Un autre tableau peint sur toile représentant le Triomphe…, peint par Poussin aussi dans sa bordure be bois sculpté doré, prèsé mil livres.” The document does not specify whether the subject is a *Triumph of Venus* or a *Triumph of Galatea*.

52. Ibid., pp. 111, 116.

53. Laing 1986–87 (note 8), pp. 208–212, for an illuminating discussion of this family’s patronage of Boucher.


58. See *Un Suédois à Paris au 18e siècle: La collection Tessin* (note 32), pp. 82–83. From Tessin’s account books, it can be established that Tessin acquired Lancret’s *Woman with Skates for 400 livres* on 17 July 1741: see *Tessin Collection* (note 6), vol. II.


64. Ibid., pp. 26, 27 (letter 15).

65. Ibid., p. 97. “Cospetto! che bella cosa! Il n’ya a des yeux comme les vortes qui en soient dignes.”


71. A complete set of the *L’Histoire de Psyché* tapestries was woven for King Fredrik I of Sweden between October 1745 and April 1747.


74. Jean de La Fontaine, *The Loves of Cupid and Psyche: in verse and prose. From the French of La Fontaine, Author of the celebrated Tales and Fables. To which are prefixed, a Version of the same story, From the Latin of Apuleius. With a New life of La Fontaine, Extracted from a great Variety of Authors. The whole illustrated with notes, by Mr. Lockman*, London 1744.


76. Jean de La Fontaine, *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon*, pp. 255–256 (note 73); Jean de La Fontaine, *The Loves of Cupid and Psyche: in verse and prose*, p. 301 (note 74). That this passage may have served as a literary source follows a suggestion made by Laing in his unpublished entry on the painting (see note 8).


