Natoire and Boucher: Two Studies for a Don Quixote Tapestry

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Charles-Joseph Natoire (1700–1777) and François Boucher (1703–1770), the one born in Nimes, the other in Paris, were contemporaries, separated by only three years. Both attended François Lemoyne’s studio about 1720–21. Successively awarded the Prix de Rome, in 1721 and 1723, respectively, they followed one another in their Italian travels and were briefly together at the Palazzo Mancini during the summer of 1728. Natoire left Rome in October of that year for Lombardy and Venice, arriving back in France in 1729; Boucher returned to Paris in 1731. Long afterward, Natoire, deploring the lack of initiative among the pensionnaires at the Académie de France during the 1750s, would recall with nostalgia the enthusiasm that had driven him and Boucher while in Rome to study the decorations of the palaces and the paintings in the Baroque churches: “When we were in their shoes, the Bouchardons, van Loo, Boucher, we needed no urging in the right direction—we were pursuing it on our own.”

Evidence of Boucher’s and Natoire’s activities in Italy survives in the form of copies after the Baroque masters in red and black chalk, such as were done, too, by Edmé Bouchardon, Pierre-Charles Trémolières, and Carle Vanloo.

When Boucher returned to Paris in the summer of 1731, Natoire was occupied with a commission for nine paintings on the theme of the History of the Gods that the Contrôleur Général des Finances, Philibert Orry, had ordered for his château of La Chapelle-Godefroy, near Nogent-sur-Seine. For the same patron, Boucher painted The Geniuses of the Fine Arts (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Troyes, 835.8). Natoire’s earliest works in the series The History of the Gods bear the date of 1731, the latest that of 1735. The style of Boucher’s painting dates it to the same period, 1734–35. On January 30, 1734, Boucher was admitted to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture after having presented his reception piece, Rinaldo and Armida (Louvre, Paris, 2720); on December 31 of that year it was Natoire’s turn to be admitted with his Venus Ordering Arms from Vulcan for Aeneas (Musée Fabre, Montpellier). Critics immediately commented on how much this picture resembled Boucher’s of the same subject, painted two years earlier for the lawyer François Derhaiz (Louvre, 2709). After their entry into the Académie, of which they became assistant professors on the same day in 1735, a number of notable commissions brought the two men together, working side by side in the royal palaces of Versailles and Fontainebleau and in the Hôtel Soubise in Paris. Despite such activities in common, however, their names were rarely associated during the years 1730–40, so greatly did their personalities differ. Nonetheless, the critic Noeultville, apropos of the paintings that Natoire exhibited at the Salon of 1739, pointed out “the resemblance of his manner to that of M. Boucher,” adding: “Even the masters are deceived by it.”

Sometimes compared by contemporary critics, such as Mariette and Voltaire, the two artists continued to encounter one another in the course of different projects during the years 1740–50 before their destinies completely diverged: in 1751 Natoire left for Rome to replace Jean-François de Troy as director of the Académie de France; in Paris Boucher’s career would lead him to the highest distinctions and honors.

Two drawings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, offer valuable evidence of the relationship between Natoire and Boucher. The drawings are connected with an important commission that Natoire received from the former général, Pierre Grimod DuFort, for a number of scenes illustrating the story of Don Quixote. In 1731 Cervantes’s tale, first issued in French in 1677–78, had just been published for the second time, in a translation by FilICau de Saint-Martin.

The subject was a popular one: the book itself was to go into some twenty editions, and numerous stage
Figure 1. Charles-Joseph Natoire (French, 1700–1777). *Sancho’s Banquet on the Island of Barataria*, 1734–35. Tapestry cartoon, oil on canvas, 325 x 538 cm. Musées Nationaux du Château de Compiègne, 6870

Figure 2. Charles-Joseph Natoire. *Standing Male Figure with Left Arm Extended: Study for the Figure of Pedro Recio*, 1734–35. Red chalk, heightened with white; black-chalk stroke at bottom of sleeve; framing lines in pen and brown ink, 41.5 x 28.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Emma Swan Hall Gift, in memory of Nathalie Swan Rahv, 1983 (1983.266). See also Colorplate 6

Figure 3. Here attributed to François Boucher (French, 1703–1770). *Standing Male Figure with Left Arm Extended: Study for the Figure of Pedro Recio*, 1734–35. Red chalk, heightened with white, 38.7 x 26.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1965 (65.132). See also Colorplate 7
versions of it were performed at the Foire Saint-Laurent, a fair held annually in Paris and an occasion when traveling players gathered to entertain the public. It was also illustrated by Charles-Antoine Coypel in a series of cartoons painted between 1714 and 1732, with the last completed in 1751, which were woven at the Gobelins in a celebrated set of tapestries that was several times repeated. Grimaud Dufoort seems to have had a particular interest in Cervantes’s hero: at his marriage in 1736 he was the owner of “a tapestry of Don Quixote made in Brussels in eleven pieces,” and on the same theme he commissioned Natoire to paint “thirteen large pictures ordinarily placed in the billiard room [of the château d’Orsay]”; these formed the basis of an ambitious series of nine tapestries, which were woven at Beauvais between 1735 and 1744 in a single set for the decoration of the Hôtel Chamillart in Paris, where they were described at the time of the owner’s death.

Natoire’s first cartoon for this series is titled Sancho’s Departure for the Island of Barataria. The weaving of the tapestry based on it took place between May 1735 and December 29, 1736, in tandem with Sancho’s Banquet on the Island of Barataria (May 21, 1735–July 21, 1736) and Sancho and the Seller of Hazelnuts (July 23, 1735–August 11, 1736); the cartoon for the last of these, signed and dated 1735, was exhibited at the Académie. The drawings in the Metropolitan Museum, which are studies for the figure of the physician Pedro Recio in Sancho’s Banquet on the Island of Barataria—an episode taken from book 2, chapter 47, of Don Quixote—must therefore date from 1735 at the latest, taking into account the time required to complete a preliminary study of the composition and to execute the cartoon before the tapestry was woven in 1735–36. Boucher for his part was working on a subject from Don Quixote in another connection: for an engraving by Pierre Aveline he supplied a composition drawing in grisaille, the style of which clearly dates it to about 1735. This drawing was part of a publishing project announced by Ravenet and Dupuis in January 1737 of a series of scenes from Don Quixote engraved after paintings and drawings executed “by MM. Parrocel, Boucher, Trémolières, and other skilled painters, to follow those that have been engraved after the pictures of M. Coypel” in a work entitled Principales aventures de l’admirable Don Quichotte?

In preparing his tapestry cartoons, Natoire executed a number of composition sketches and studies in detail of certain figures. The cartoon for Sancho’s Banquet on the Island of Barataria, the ninth tapestry in the series, is today in the château of Compiègne (Figure 1). Of the two red-chalk studies in the Metropolitan Museum for the figure of Pedro Recio in this scene, one, acquired in 1983, bears the autograph signature C. Natoire in the lower right corner, overlaid by the name Carlo Marati in the artist’s hand (Figure 2, Colorplate 6). The other drawing, in the Museum since 1965, bears the same autograph signature, C. Natoire, also in the lower right corner (Figure 3, Colorplate 7). Because of these very similar signatures, which are to be found on most of the drawings in the series, and the identical subject of the two studies and its easily established link with the cartoon and tapestry of Sancho’s Banquet, both drawings have previously been catalogued under Natoire’s name. A close examination of the second sheet has now enabled us to reattribute it to François Boucher.

Boucher is immediately recognizable in his work on the hands of Pedro Recio, which are very different from those of the figure on the other sheet. The hands, the right placed on the belt, the left holding the whalebone pointer, are long and tapering, barely shaped, the wrist too flexible, all characteristics of Boucher’s drawings of hands in the years 1735–40. The same features are to be found in numerous contemporary studies preparatory to his illustrations for Molière’s Works; other examples are the red-chalk drawing in Ottawa of a young man seated (Figure 4), which is a study for the painting

Figure 4. François Boucher. Study of a Young Man Seated, ca. 1735. Red and white chalk, 35 x 26.9 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 28217r
The faces of the physician betray a similar discrepancy. With Boucher, the face is barely sketched in, represented by the lines of the eye, nose, and mouth drawn with sharp angles on an underlying oval of the whole that is still discernible. The ear is pointed and barely rendered, the volume of the hat and the movement of the hair are merely suggested. The profiles of the men in three-cornered hats that he drew for *Les plaisirs de l’île enchantée* in the *Works of Molière*, that of Lélie for *L’Étourdi* in the same publication (both studies now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), are very close to this face of Pedro Recio. In contrast Natoire renders with care the details of the eye, ear, beard, and hat. At the same time he gives the figure of the doctor a different character: he disengages the neck and simplifies the draping of the cloak, thus taking away from the subject both his bulk and his authority. Where one artist works in breadth, the other elongates the figure.

Boucher’s man is better placed in the surrounding space: he steps forward and gestures, pointer in hand, as he causes every dish presented to Sancho to be whisked away before the latter can touch it; the drapery of his voluminous garment, traditionally worn by doctors at the time, is flung over one shoulder and floats behind him. Natoire’s Pedro Recio is static; he argues with a rhetorical flourish of his right hand as he explains to Sancho that he is acting in the interests of the other’s health. His cloak envelops him down to the ground, parting only to reveal the elegant leg of a court physician in satin breeches.

The hatching used by Natoire and Boucher in their treatment of the clothing conveys the same difference in their perception of Pedro Recio, no doubt instinctive rather than planned, reflecting the characters of two artists working on the same subject. Boucher’s Pedro Recio causes his heavy garment to move as he steps forward; the deep folds of the cloak are emphatically rendered by broad transversal hatching. Moreover, the area in reserve in Boucher’s study is distinctly more important than in Natoire’s, reinforcing the presence of the figure in its space; the whites are stressed, distributed on the right elbow, which is intended to stand out in the foreground of the drawing, and on the broken folds of the cloak that hangs down the doctor’s back and on those of the right shoulder, the chest, and the waist. Natoire’s highlights in white chalk are differently conceived: they are
slight and are placed over the entire back of the figure, from top to bottom; they fall, too, on the table, which Boucher has scarcely bothered to render other than with three lines lacking highlights.

Again, the red chalk is used differently by the two artists. Natoire’s stroke is supple and lightweight, in color a pale red; Boucher’s is much darker and in parts much thicker. It is heavily applied on the right side of the sheet, on the chest and front of Recio’s clothing, to emphasize and amplify the effects of shade as opposed to light and to give the subject greater plastic force. This technique of creating a sense of volume by means of an important contrast between the light and dark parts of the sheet is found in all Boucher’s studies of full-length figures in this period, in particular those for Molière’s characters in the 1735 edition of his Works. Natoire makes no use of it. The result of these different approaches is a greater harmony with Natoire, greater dynamic energy with Boucher.

All the evidence suggests that the two drawings were done at the same time for the same subject and that Natoire had both sheets in his hands, since he put his name to them in the same black chalk. His study establishes Recio’s pose as it appears in the wash composition sketch, now in Warsaw, that preceded the cartoon of the tapestry (Figure 5). This shows Sancho’s doctor explaining and justifying his role in the rapid disappearance of every dish of food placed before his master. Although Boucher’s study has the appearance of a very hasty first sketch, it was to this version that Natoire reverted when he painted the actual cartoon: here the doctor no longer speaks, he simply points with his “rod of whalebone.” The anger visible in Sancho’s face indicates that the scene is nearing its conclusion, with Sancho, in his capacity as “governor” of Barataria, about to dismiss his physician. The tapestry woven at Beauvais from this cartoon in 1735–36 (Figure 6) thus uses—in reverse—Boucher’s conception of the figure, stronger and more telling than Natoire’s. We seem to be confronted, in fact, with an exemplary illustration of an exchange of ideas between the two artists, one developing a more elegant and anecdotal formula, the other bringing another dimension to his drawing by insisting rather on the authority of the doctor’s gesture and of his presence on the scene.

Boucher readily gave artists who applied to him suggestions for compositions and poses. An example is a drawing by him in black chalk of Philip of Bourbon-Parma surrounded by his family, which supplied Boucher’s pupil Giuseppe Baldrighi with the composition for Baldrighi’s painting of the subject (Galleria Nazionale, Parma). Similarly, in the present case, Natoire has simply adopted a suggestion for the figure of Pedro Recio that Boucher had rapidly committed to paper for him. Odile Picard Sébastiani, in her study of Natoire’s cartoons at Compiègne, has emphasized “the relationship of Boucher and Natoire’s styles at this period of their lives,” in connecting Natoire’s Dorothea Surprised in his tenth cartoon of 1742–43 for the Don Quixote series with Boucher’s Diana at the Bath signed and dated 1742 (Louvre, 2712).

The name “Carlo Marati” written by Natoire on his study for Pedro Recio in the Metropolitan Museum suggests a reflection shared by the two artists of the figure of a man in profile, draped in a flowing cloak, with one arm extended forward, that had been drawn or painted by the Italian artist Carlo Maratti (or Maratta, 1625–1713). Perhaps Natoire and Boucher’s
point of departure was the recollection of a drawing done by Boucher in Italy precisely after this artist (Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna, 1880): it shows a man in profile, with one leg advanced and an arm extended, his body draped in a flowing cloak. Was it known to Natoire? Did Boucher suggest it as a starting point? Did the two men discuss the model copied, or work from memory of the motif or its counterpart? Possibly Natoire himself had made a copy of the original during his time in Italy.15

The studies of Pedro Recio so fortuitously reunited at the Metropolitan Museum constitute a rare and touching witness to the relationship of two great artists at a time when their commissions and activities frequently brought them together. The same collectors also saw them working on their drawings after the old masters. Perrin Stein has convincingly shown how Natoire in the 1740s would visit Mariette’s collection in order to copy the sheets by Italian artists.14 Boucher followed the same practice, to judge, for example, from his pen and ink copy after Antonio Campi’s Deorative Motif, which was then in Mariette’s collection, attributed to Giovanni Battista Tinti.15 A genuine friendship may have linked the two men; a genuine artistic complicity evidently existed between them. This adds a special touch of nostalgia to Natoire’s letter of June 97, 1770, written from Rome to the marquis de Marigny: “I am grieved by the death of M. Boucher. It is a real loss for the Académie, and for me the loss of an old colleague of my student days with whom I had had close ties.”16

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NOTES


3. Ibid., pp. 15–17.

4. Quoted in Alexandre Ananoff, with Daniel Wildenstein, François Boucher (Lausanne, 1976), vol. 1, p. 18.


8. Jacob Bean, with Lawrencce Turčič, 15th–18th Century French Drawings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, 1986), nos. 206 (55.132; see Figure 3), 207 (1982.466; see Figure 2), both titled Standing Male Figure with Left Arm Extended. For a counterproof of the second drawing (55.132), with no signature, see Galerie Galilées, Le Rouge et le noir: Cent dessins français de 1700 à 1870 (Paris, 1991), no. 26.

9. For the most complete study of Boucher’s early drawings, some of them preparatory to his illustrations for Molière’s Works published in 1735, see Beverly Schreiber Jacoby, François Boucher’s Early Development as a Draughtsman, 1735–1751, Outstanding Dissertations in the Fine Arts (New York, 1986).

10. This study was first published by Stanislawo Sawicka, “Un dessin inédit de Charles Natoire pour la tapisserie de l’hôtel de don Quijote,” in Miscellanea I. Q. van Regieringen Altena, 16/V1969 (Amsterdam, 1969), pp. 190–95, fig. 1 (p. 173).


12. See Picard Sébastien in Picard Sébastien and Krotoff, Don Quichotte, p. 22, figs. 5, 6. See also Laing in François Boucher, 1703–1770, no. 59.

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13. On Boucher’s copy of the drawing by Maratti, see Veronika Birke and Janine Kertész, *Die italienischen Zeichnungen der Albertina: Generalverzeichnis, Veröffentlichungen der Albertina* 33–36 (Vienna, 1992–97), vol. 1, inv. 1080. A drawing by Maratti recently sold in London (Sotheby’s, July 10, 2002, lot 150) shows the same kind of figure in profile, one leg advanced and one hand extended before him with an air of authority.


15. I am indebted to Veronika Birke and Janine Kertész for informing me of this reattribution, which I first published in “François Boucher et Pierre Crozat: Le rôle de la collection privée dans la formation d’un artiste au début du XVIIIème siècle,” an article written in 1989 and posted on my personal Web site (“François Boucher”) in June 1999 on the occasion of the Horvitz colloquium in Paris: “Deux siècles de dessin français, XVIIème et XVIIIème siècles: XVIIème rencontres de l’École du Louvre.” Boucher’s Architectural Element (Graphische Sammlung Albertina, Vienna, 12169) is in pen and brown ink and brown wash; the drawing attributed to Campi, Decorative Motif (Albertina, 2836), is in black chalk, pen and brown ink, and brown wash.

16. Montaiglon and Guiffrey, *Correspondance des directeurs de l’Académie de France à Rome*, vol. 12, pp. 278–79 (June 27, 1770). An interesting mention in the Lempereur auction catalogue (Lugt 2444) of October 19–24, 1775, shows that drawings for *Don Quixote* by Natoire and Boucher were gathered by collectors. Described under the same lot, 102, are “cinq etudes de figures, & sujets pour l’Histoire de Don Quichotte, par F. Boucher & C. Natoire.” I am very grateful to Perrin Stein for drawing my attention to that mention.