

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM  
FINE ARTS

**FRANÇOIS BOUCHER**

Paris 1703 - id. 1770

French school

**THE SLEEPING CHRIST CHILD**

Oil on canvas with arched top, in brown monochrome  
H. 0,63 m; W. 0,37 m

DATE: between 1759 and 1763

PROVENANCE:

Most probably, Pierre-Louis-Paul Randon de Boisset (1708-1776), Receveur général des Finances

Most probably, his posthumous sale, Paris, 27 February 1777, lot 189 (described in the catalogue as "*la première pensée du tableau précédent, peinte en grisaille*"; the preceding lot [188] being François Boucher's *La Nativité de Notre-Seigneur*)

Private collection, Canada

Private collection, France

RELATED WORK:

The present work is a preparatory study for an oil painting of the same size (H. 0,62 m ; W. 0,37 m), signed and dated lower right: *F. Boucher / 1763*, which Boucher exhibited at the salon of 1763: "Par M. Boucher, Recteur. / 9. Le Sommeil de l'Enfant Jésus. / Tableau ceinturé de 2 pieds de haut, sur un pied de large." See A. Ananoff, D. Wildenstein, *François Boucher*, t. II, Lausanne and Paris, 1976, p. 227, no. 573; now with Galerie Talabardon & Gautier, Paris.



François Boucher, *The Sleeping Christ Child*, 1763,  
Talabardon & Gautier, Paris / Guillaume Benoit.

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**Famous for his *fêtes galantes*, Boucher also created religious paintings throughout his career, which are exemplified by their narrative and emotional character. His depictions of a youthful Virgin are evocative of his many pastoral scenes.**

With his vision of a happy world, François Boucher is the most representative painter of 18<sup>th</sup> century France. He had a brilliant career and received all the honours possible. A pupil of François Lemoyne, he completely renewed history painting which, with unequalled refinement, now echoed the elegance of Parisian society. A great decorator, he was involved with the main commissions for the royal residences and also worked for townhouses, created sets for the Opera and designed tapestry cartoons. Boucher's art became unpopular during the neoclassical period and was rediscovered during the Second Empire.

### A “playful” Vision of Sacred Stories

Better known for his *fêtes galantes* and for his pastoral and mythological scenes, Boucher also produced a large number of religious paintings throughout his career,<sup>1</sup> especially during the 1730s and after a gap, in the last twenty years of his life. After 1750, Boucher was given several commissions for religious paintings by his major patron, Madame de Pompadour, whose recent piety probably played an important part in the reintroduction of religious themes to his work. Boucher's religious compositions are epitomized by their narrative and emotional character. His depictions of a youthful Virgin are evocative of his many pastoral scenes. The gravity and fervour of artists such as Le Sueur and Philippe de Champaigne are completely absent. Yet, are they superficial works? To compare the profane grace of the Enlightenment with the Grand Siècle leads us to false interpretations. Boucher's aesthetic corresponds in truth perfectly to the sensitivity and religious trends of his time and for his contemporaries, his “playful” vision of sacred stories did not distort the meaning of the text.<sup>2</sup>

### The Nativity Theme

In 1750, Boucher illustrated the theme of the birth of Christ in his painting *La Lumière du Monde*,<sup>3</sup> now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts Lyon, painted for Madame de Pompadour for her Château de Bellevue. This theme was dear to the artist, who was frequently inspired by Italian Baroque painting, from Genoa, Bologna and Venice especially. Boucher condensed the works of his predecessors in showing a compact crowd gathered around the Child. However, he changed atmosphere by focusing the action on chosen figures, whose familiarity signifies the scene's universal nature. In the same way, Boucher has emphasized the importance of the motif of light radiating from Jesus, which had been made popular by Correggio's famous painting *The Holy Night* (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister). But he no longer used the tenebrism that had been fashionable until the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. In his work, the divine becomes tangible thanks to the radiant Christ Child which emotionally encompasses the men surrounding him.<sup>4</sup> This light which emanates from the Christ child refers to the Song of Simeon who, when Jesus was presented at the temple, recognized “a light for revelation to the nations” (Luke 2, 32).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Christine Gouzi, Boucher's religious work corresponds to about 10% of the total of what he produced (as an indication, 51 numbers of the 690 in Ananoff's catalogue of the paintings and 78 numbers of 1014 in his catalogue of the drawings to which a few pieces, paintings and drawings discovered since, should be added). See Christine Gouzi, “François Boucher (1703-1770), peintre religieux”, *Chrétiens et sociétés* [online: <http://journals.openedition.org/chretienssocietes/4018> ], 9 | 2002, note 11.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Gouzi, “François Boucher (1703-1770), peintre religieux”, *Chrétiens et sociétés*, 9 | 2002, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> A. Ananoff and D. Wildenstein, *François Boucher*, t. II, 1976, no. 340.

<sup>4</sup> Christine Gouzi, “François Boucher (1703-1770), peintre religieux”, *Chrétiens et sociétés*, 9 | 2002, p. 16-17.

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About fifteen paintings and about twenty drawings have been recorded by Boucher on the theme of the birth of Christ, most of which date to the years 1750 and 1760.<sup>5</sup>

### **Our Sketch for *The Sleeping Christ Child***

Our oil sketch is a preparatory study for the painting *The Sleeping Christ Child*,<sup>6</sup> which was exhibited at the 1763 Salon. It corresponds perfectly to the final painting, with the same dimensions, except for the angel's position, leaning slightly further forward, throwing flowers. Painted in shades of brown, the sketch is characterized by the fluidity of the brushstrokes and the subtle differentiation between the shadow and light, which are typical of Boucher's oil sketches.

Diderot commented thus on the finished painting: "(...) the Christ Child is sleeping and the Virgin watches over him; suddenly an angel floats in the air, while St. Joseph is asleep behind the Virgin." Although Diderot was not completely positive in his analysis of the painting – he almost never was with Boucher – he found the angel and St. Joseph particularly beautiful: "The Glory is very airy. The flying angel is perfectly vaporous. It would be impossible to give a greater touch and to give a better head to the Joseph who is dozing behind the Virgin (...)"<sup>7</sup>

### **A Passionate Collector**

In 1777 our sketch and the finished painting were probably both in the posthumous sale of Pierre-Louis-Paul Randon de Boisset, the general tax collector (or *receveur-général des finances*) for Lyon and one of the most important collectors of his time. The final painting seems to correspond to lot 188 of this auction, the work for which our study was described as "The initial idea for the preceding painting, painted in grisaille."<sup>8</sup> In fact it is coherent that the collector would own both the finished composition and the preparatory study, as he and Boucher had been friends. The artist may have given the preparatory study to his patron after he had bought the final work at the Salon. Known for having collected this type of study, Randon de Boisset owned a number of such works by Rubens.

Pierre-Louis-Paul Randon de Boisset was an avid collector, not only of Dutch and French paintings, but also of drawings, books, sculptures, porcelain and furniture. He went to Italy in 1752 and again in 1763; in 1766, he was in the Netherlands with François Boucher who acted as his artistic advisor. In addition to our painting and the finished version, his posthumous sale includes ten other paintings and numerous drawings by Boucher.

The annotations in a copy of the catalogue now in the Bibliothèque Doucet indicate the buyer of the Salon painting as "de Wailly" for 800 livres and the buyer of our painting as "de Wille" for 271 livres. Alastair Laing<sup>9</sup> has suggested that "de Wille" is in fact a spelling mistake as the

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<sup>5</sup> Alexandre Ananoff, *L'œuvre dessiné de François Boucher*, Paris, 1966, vol. 1 (the only volume published); Alexandre Ananoff and Daniel Wildenstein (dir.), *François Boucher*, Lausanne and Paris, 1976, 2 vol. and *L'opera completa di Boucher*, Milan, 1980; see Christine Gouzi, "François Boucher (1703-1770), peintre religieux", *Chrétiens et sociétés*, 9 | 2002, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *The Sleeping Christ Child*, oil on canvas, H. 0,62 m ; L. 0,37 m, signed and dated lower right: *F. Boucher / 1763*, A. Ananoff, D. Wildenstein, *François Boucher*, t. II, Lausanne and Paris, 1976, p. 227, no. 573 ; currently with Galerie Talabardon & Gautier, Paris.

<sup>7</sup> J. Seznec and J. Adhémar, *Diderot Salons*, vol. I : 1759, 1761, 1763, Oxford, 1957, p. 162, no. 9, and 204-205.

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately it is impossible to know with certainty whether lot 188 of the Randon de Boisset sale is identical to the painting exhibited at the Salon, as the dimensions given in the auction catalogue seem to be incorrect ("*ceintrée du haut, 1 pied 10 pouces de haut, 2 pieds 8 pouces de large*"). It does seem likely that these dimensions are incorrect as it is highly unlikely that a religious composition which is glorified for the depiction of the angel and the atmosphere would be horizontal rather than vertical.

<sup>9</sup> Written communication dated 30 October 2010, confirmed in an email of 16 February 2019.

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famous architect and town planner Charles de Wailly was himself a collector of Boucher studies and he owned two other preparatory studies of the *Annunciation* and the *Assumption* – one of which was also in brown shades.