

# LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

## KUNST



FRANÇOIS BOUCHER

1703 - Paris - 1773

*Hercules and Omphale*

Black chalk, touches of black pastel crayon on paper; executed c.1745.

Signed (?) in pen and brown ink lower left outside the framing line: *f. Boucher*

200 x 150 mm

PROVENANCE: Private Collection, France

François Boucher, who was appointed *premier peintre du roi* in 1765, produced a large body of work centring on the loves of the Olympian gods – mythological themes had become easily accessible in the early eighteenth century thanks to the publication of translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*. But he produced few depictions of the mythological lovers Hercules and Omphale. His most famous version is an early painting now held in the Puschkin Museum in Moscow [Fig. 1]. A later copy by his pupil Fragonard exists. Boucher's painting dates from the period 1730–35 when he was working on an important series of mythological paintings commissioned by the lawyer François Derbais. The palette and handling of the Moscow painting show a considerable debt to his teacher, the painter François Lemoyne who had also produced a version of the subject. Boucher's version, which portrays the couple's lovemaking with a degree of erotic intensity rarely seen in his work, was kept permanently hidden from view by its owner, the collector Randon de Boisset. It is interesting to compare it with the present drawing which was executed some ten years later, namely around 1745. The two works are unrelated. Moving on from the sensuality of the embrace in the Puschkin painting, the tenor of the present composition is sober by comparison. A young couple is depicted in a chaste embrace, seated amid drapery. The only indication of Hercules's identity is his attribute the club, which two putti are playfully examining. There is no sign of his other main attribute, the lion's skin. Omphale raises her left hand towards her partner's face in a timid gesture. Her gentle caress expresses tenderness towards him. He is no longer subservient to her, the queen of Lydia. Or might the female figure be Deianeira, his wife?

Executed solely in concise strokes of black chalk, the scene is enlivened by Boucher's skilful exploitation of areas of untouched paper. The ductus is assured and considered. Effects of shadow are worked out using areas of delicate but assertive hatching. The play of light and shadow creates an illusion of pictorial depth and roundness, while reducing spatial depth at the right of the sheet. Unusually, light enters from the left illuminating the centre of the image. The subtle interaction of light on Omphale's body, its graceful contours, the muscularity of the male figure – which recalls the nude studies Boucher was producing at the time – and the use of touches of black pastel crayon to enhance a sense of spatial depth lend the drawing a remarkable monumentality, despite its small format. The sheet may be dated to the artist's mature period. Its eloquent simplicity places it in the years around 1745-50 which are defined by an interest in clarity and light. They precede his experimentation with wash-tinted supports and systematic use of stumping to indicate volume. The present sheet cannot be related to any recorded painting. However its clarity and precision, together

with its dating, suggest that it was made as a finished work of art to be reproduced and distributed in the form of an engraving in the artist's maturity.

As I recall, a retouched counterproof of this composition (black and red chalk) attributed to François Boucher is held at the Musée Bonnat-Hélleu in Bayonne [Fig. 2].

Françoise Joulie

Françoise Joulie has examined the drawing and confirms its authenticity. We are grateful to her for preparing this catalogue entry. – Alastair Laing has kindly confirmed the authenticity of the drawing on the basis of a photograph. We thank him for his assistance.



Fig. 1: *Hercules and Omphale*, 1730 - 35  
oil on canvas, 90 x 74 cm  
Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow  
[Inv.: ZH-2764]



Fig. 2: *Hercules and Omphale*  
Retouched counterproof of this composition,  
attributed to François Boucher  
Black and red chalk, 224 x 164 mm  
Musée Bonnat-Hélleu, Bayonne