Madame de Pompadour Painted Pink

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Making Up Race

Whiteness, Pinkness, and Pompadour

Oliver Wunsch

BOUCHER'S PORTRAIT OF MADAME de Pompadour revolves around the subject of skin color. Originally conceived as a small portrait closely framed around the face of the royal mistress, it was enlarged a short time later into a more complex composition depicting Pompadour as she applies her rouge. These additions, likely carried out by Boucher himself, were ostensibly meant to cover up damage that the painting had sustained in transit.[1] More than a practical repair, however, the changes raise larger questions about the presentation of skin in the middle of the eighteenth century—and about the significance of pink skin in particular.

The role of cosmetics in Boucher's painting has long interested art historians, who have pointed out the connection that the portrait implies between makeup and paint. For Melissa Hyde, the portrait is a response to period critics who regarded both paint and makeup as tools of social duplicity; Boucher and Pompadour, Hyde argues, proudly declare themselves tricksters, embracing artifice as an essential component of creative expression.[2] Ewa Lajer-Burcharth has further emphasized how Pompadour's use of makeup registers her material role in fabricating her own image, with artist and subject acting as co-creators.[3]

But for all the attention that scholars have devoted to the painting's treatment of makeup, surprisingly little has been said

1. Alden R. Gordon and Teri Hensick, "The Picture within the Picture: Boucher's 1750 Portrait of Madame de Pompadour Identified," *Apollo* 155 (480) (February 2002): 21–30.

2. Melissa Hyde, "The 'Makeup' of the Marquise: Boucher's Portrait of Pompadour at Her Toilette," *The Art Bulletin* 82 (3) (September 2000): 453–75.

3. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, "Pompadour's Touch: Difference in Representation," *Representations* 73 (1) (Winter 2001): 54–88.

about questions of skin color. What was the significance of pink skin in the mid-eighteenth century? And what might it mean to display oneself in the act of *constructing* that pinkness?

These questions gain urgency when we consider the historical setting. The eighteenth century marked a moment of profound transformation in the way Europeans understood the meaning of skin color. Complexion, which had historically been regarded as a marker of gender and class, was now seen in a broader geographic context. At a time when Europeans were enslaving millions of African people to support their overseas colonies, they began to incorporate skin color into new theories of physiological difference—ones that they could invoke as justification for their actions.[4]

These ideas did not emerge overnight, nor did they displace the old values and associations that Europeans had attached to complexion. On the contrary, as recent scholarship on the history of race has shown, eighteenth-century conceptions of skin color were defined by their instability and heterogeneity.[5] It was, in fact, the confusion and incipient status of this racial consciousness that allowed artists to play a role in shaping it.[6]

This essay situates Boucher's portrait of Pompadour within the eighteenth century's evolving conception of skin color. After placing the portrait in the context of period commentary on pink skin, I examine how Pompadour's distinctive identity—as a bourgeoise with intimate knowledge of the French slave trade—suggests what skin color might have meant to her in particular. Finally, I compare Boucher's portrait with another painting that Pompadour commissioned of herself at the same moment, one that shows how she repeatedly used art to play with the status and privilege afforded by her complexion.

4. For the French racialization of skin color as a justification for slavery, see especially Pierre H. Boulle, *Race et esclavage dans la France de l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Perrin, 2007); and Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

5. Roxann Wheeler, in particular, has emphasized this point; see Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). In a French context, Andrew Curran has similarly drawn attention to the instability of eighteenth-century conceptions of race; see Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*.

6. For two recent studies that begin to address the role that artists played in constructing period ideas about skin color, see Anne Lafont, *L'art et la race: L'Africain (tout) contre l'œil des Lumières* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2019); and Mechthild Fend, *Fleshing out Surfaces: Skin in French Art and Medicine, 1650–1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

Makeup and skin, of course, are not the same thing. Makeup is a medium of perfection that serves, in the words of the *Encyclopédie*, "to embellish ... to repair by artifice."[7] But this aspirational quality of makeup is precisely what makes it a revealing indication of the values that a society attaches to skin itself. To understand what it meant for Pompadour to paint herself pink, we therefore need to begin by examining how her makeup relates to the deeper dermal fantasies of her time.

White and pink cosmetics were, in and of themselves, nothing new. The practice of using white and red substances to color the face dates at least to Greek and Roman antiquity.[8] In the Classical world, white complexion was correlated with social status, an indication that one did not need to work in the sun for a living.[9] Pink, in this context, served to highlight the whiteness of the surrounding skin by way of contrast and to prevent the face from acquiring a lifeless pallor.[10] These associations persisted into the early modern period, when white and pink cosmetics were essential accessories for anyone wishing to appear in European court society.[11]

While the basic palette of the face remained relatively consistent among the European elite, the ideas associated with these colors evolved. One significant factor was social mobility. The spread of luxury markets and the rise of bourgeois consumption meant that cosmetics once associated with noble status became a less reliable indicator of social rank.[12] Makeup had always been subject to ridicule as a medium of deceit, especially as a tool of feminine duplicity, but by the end of the seventeenth century it was increasingly regarded as a means of class dissimulation.[13] By the mid-eighteenth century, artist Charles-Nicolas Cochin wondered why rouge carried any social value at all when it was affordable across classes: "It is astonishing that we

7. "Embellir...réparer par artifice." Louis de Jaucourt, "Fard," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 6 (Paris: Briasson, 1756), 408; translation mine.

8. Mireille M. Lee, *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 66–69; and Kelly Olson, "Cosmetics in Roman Antiquity: Substance, Remedy, Poison," *The Classical World* 102 (3) (2009): 291–310.

9. Lee, *Body, Dress, and Identity in Ancient Greece*, 67; and Olson, "Cosmetics in Roman Antiquity," 294–95.

10. In addition to the sources cited above, see Michael Hendry, "Rouge and Crocodile Dung: Notes on Ovid, Ars 3.199–200 and 269–70," *The Classical Quarterly* 45 (2) (1995): 583–88.

11. Catherine Lanoë, *La poudre et le fard: Une histoire des cosmétiques de la Renaissance aux Lumières* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2008), 27–77.

12. Ibid., 278–79; and Lynn Festa, "Cosmetic Differences: The Changing Faces of England and France," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 34 (1) (2005): 38.

13. On the long history of gender in anti-cosmetic discourse, see Jacqueline Lichtenstein, "Making Up Representation: The Risks of Femininity," *Representations*

Fig. 1
Henri Bonnart, *Dame*, 1677, from *Recueil des modes de la cour de France* (Collection of Fashion from the Court of France), album compiled by an unidentified collector, c. 1702–4. Hand-colored engraving on paper, 36.51 × 23.81 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. H. Tony Oppenheimer, Mr. and Mrs. Reed Oppenheimer, Hal Oppenheimer, Alice and Nahum Lainer, Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Oppenheimer, Ricki and Marvin Ring, Mr. and Mrs. Davi Sydorick, the Costume Council Fund, and member of the Costume Council, M.2002.57.2

have attached this distinction to a color that is so common and so cheap that the smallest *grisettes* can make this expenditure as copiously as a person of the highest birth."[14] He went on to joke that the truly wealthy might consider painting their cheeks with a more expensive color, such as ultramarine blue, to distinguish themselves.[15]

As the class connotations of makeup became more muddled, pink skin acquired another source of prestige. With Europeans expanding their geographic horizons and imperial ambitions, they began to judge their complexion in relation to people on distant continents. French women, for example, started to highlight the whiteness of their complexion by contrasting it with the skin of African people they enslaved.[16] The inscription on a fashion plate from the late seventeenth century (Fig. 1) makes the strategy explicit:

> Beauties whose unique aspiration
> Is for you to be everywhere adored
> To raise the brilliance of your complexion
> Make use, like I do, of a blackmoor.[17]

Much like using rouge to showcase the whiteness of the surrounding face, the enslaved boy here acts as a foil to a white ideal. The device became a familiar trope in French and British portraiture, deployed by artists from Pierre Mignard (Fig. 2) to Joshua Reynolds (Fig. 3).

20 (Fall 1987): 77–87.

14. "Il est étonnant qu'on a attaché cette distinction à une couleur qui est si comm et à si bon marché, que les plus petites grisettes pou raient faire cette dépense aussi abondamment qu'une personne de la plus haute naissance." Charles-Nicol Cochin, "Avis aux Dames," *Mercure de France*, May 175 130; translation mine.

15. Ibid.

16. For an overview of the topic, see David Bindman and Helen Weston, "Court and City: Fantasies of Domination," in *The Image of the Black in Western Ar* vol. 3, pt. 3, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Cambridge, M Harvard University Press 2011), 125–70.

Fig. 2
Pierre Mignard, *Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth with an unknown female attendant*, 1682. Oil on canvas, 120.7 × 95.3 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London, Purchased, 1878, NPG 497.

European men, too, commissioned portraits of themselves with enslaved people, but it was in depictions of women that the genre was most expressly linked to questions of beauty and complexion. The format was sometimes incorporated into a toilette scene, in which the white woman attempts to lighten the skin of her enslaved attendant by washing him (Fig. 4). Such portraits referenced the French proverbial saying "to whiten a Moor," which meant "to attempt the impossible."[18] Cosmetics might be capable of masking class distinctions, but the futile effort to whiten dark skin was meant to demonstrate the limits of what could be accomplished through rituals of the toilette. Some bodily distinctions, according to the racist logic of such images, are too great to overcome.

Boucher's painting of Pompadour does not belong to this overtly racist genre. One might even ask whether it has any connection to race at all. Historians of eighteenth-century art have tended to interpret portraits through a racial lens only when these works depict people of color. Portrayals of white people are implicitly seen as race neutral.[19] And yet, just as a portrait of a solitary man can say something about masculinity, a portrait of a white person alone can deliver a message about race. Unsealing that message requires us to look more closely at both the painting itself and the background of the person at its center.

First, what Boucher's painting shows us: Pompadour sits at a mirror, in the midst of applying her

Fig. 3
Joshua Reynolds, *Portrait of Lady Elizabeth Keppel*, 1761. Oil on canvas, 236 × 146 cm. Woburn Abbey, Collection of the Duke of Bedford.

17. With modern French orthography: "Belles dont l'unique dessein / Est que partout on vous adore / Pour relever l'éclat du teint / Comme moi servez-vous d'un More." Translation mine.

18. Jean Michel Massing, "From Greek Proverb to Soap Advert: Washing the Ethiopian," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 58 (1995): 180–201.

19. For a notable exception, see Angela Rosenthal, "Visceral Culture: Blushing and the Legibility of Whiteness in Eighteenth-Century British Portraiture," *Art History* 24 (4) (2004): 563–92.

makeup. In one hand, she holds her *boîte à rouge*, a small container for storing the reddish-pink makeup that gives her cheeks their rosy hue (see p. 14). In the other, she gently clasps a *brosse à rouge*, a newly fashionable accessory that allowed for the precise application of makeup (p. 3).[20] On the table, we find her *boîte à poudre*, its top ajar (p. 13). Pompadour, it seems, has already used the feather brush on top—made from the finest down—to powder her face a brilliant white.[21] These accoutrements, which represent the latest trends in the cosmetics market, signal Pompadour's embrace of France's expanding consumer economy.

Fig. 4
Pierre Gobert, *Portrait of a lad three-quarter-length, traditional identified as Louise Bernardine Durfort, Duchess of Duras (167 1747), with Cupid and a page, b a fountain*, c. 1695–1700. Oil o canvas, 127.7 × 100 cm. Privat collection.

Biographies of Pompadour frequently emphasize how she brought the sensibility of a bourgeoise to Versailles, solidifying bonds between the monarchy and France's ascendant financial elite.[22] The array of luxury goods in the toilette scene no doubt speaks to this class identity. They signal, as Melissa Hyde has observed, how Pompadour shrewdly performed her role as an arriviste at court, deploying fine cosmetics in a carefully calibrated social act.[23] But the significance of these commodities is not simply a matter of class status. They also point to France's increasingly global cosmetics industry, hinting at worlds far beyond the confines of Versailles.

Rouge in particular was a product of international commerce. Europeans had created versions of the cosmetic from locally available materials such as alkanet dye and iron oxide since antiquity, but by the sixteenth century, these materials began to compete with more exotic ingredients. Pernambuco wood from Brazil,

20. Lanoë, *La poudre et le fard*, 61.

21. Powder puffs—or houpp as they were known—were typically made of either eiderdown or another ligh bird feather. Denis Dider "Houppe," in *Encyclopédi ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 8 (Pari Briasson, 1765), 326.

22. See, for example, Danielle Gallet-Guerne, *Madame de Pompadour, ou, Le pouvoir féminin* (Pari Fayard, 1985).

23. Hyde, "The 'Makeup' the Marquise."

sandalwood from Southeast Asia, and cochineal from Mexico and Central America all found their way onto the cheeks of European women.[24] These materials ranged in both color and price. Pernambuco wood was among the cheaper options but tended to yield a less saturated rouge than other sources. Cochineal, the insect from which carmine is derived, produced a much more vibrant hue but was exceptionally expensive.[25] The materials traveled thousands of miles to reach European shores, becoming an integral part of the triangle trade that linked Europe, Africa, and the Americas.[26]

More than most people at the time, Pompadour was well situated to understand the workings of this economy. Her upbringing and personal fortunes were intimately tied to French colonialism, particularly the institution of slavery that undergirded it. Her legal guardian and surrogate father, Charles-François Lenormant de Tournehem, was a director of the Compagnie des Indes, which oversaw the French slave trade throughout much of the eighteenth century.[27] Her godfather, financier Jean Pâris de Monmartel, was one of the principal sponsors of the slave trading company known as the Société d'Angole, providing nearly 20 percent of the capital for the group's formation in 1748.[28] These actions were part of a broader expansion of French investment in slavery during the first half of the eighteenth century. French traders abducted approximately five thousand people from Africa each year in the 1710s; by the late 1730s, the number of people forced onto French ships had soared above eighteen thousand.[29] At mid-century, France sent an average of fifty-five ships on slaving missions every year, each ship commonly transporting more than two hundred fifty enslaved people.[30] On average, one in seven people died during the course of the voyage.[31]

24. Lanoë, *La poudre et le fard*, 53–57.

25. Ibid., 56.

26. Emily Lynn Osborn, "Red Echoes of Enslavement: Cochineal Red, West Africa, and the Slave Trade," in *A Red Like No Other: How Cochineal Colored the World: An Epic Story of Art, Culture, Science, and Trade*, ed. Carmella Padilla and Barbara Anderson (New York: Skira/Rizzoli, 2015), 82–87; and James E. McClellan III, *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 152–55.

27. Philippe Haudrère, "L'origine du personnel de direction générale de la Compagnie française des Indes, 1719–1794," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 67 (248) (1980): 354. The Compagnie des Indes held a monopoly on French commerce on the African coast from 1720 to 1767. During this period, it outfitted its own slave ships while also selling slaving licenses to other companies. Pierre Dardel, *Navires et marchandises dans les ports de Rouen et du Havre au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1963), 137.

28. André Delcourt, *La France et les établissements français au Sénégal entre 1713 et 1763* (Dakar: IFAN, 1952), 75. Monmartel invested 375,000 livres of the total two million livres invested in the company at its inception. Gaston Martin, *Nantes au XVIIIe siècle: L'ère des négriers* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1931), 250–51.

If Pompadour's upbringing did not alert her to this economy, then her ascent to the halls of royal power surely did. By 1748, a new slave ship had been christened in her honor, and another vessel would be named for her in the coming years.[32] In 1749, she and Louis XV visited the port city of Le Havre, where Pompadour placed a ceremonial peg in a newly commissioned 320-ton slave ship named *Le Gracieux*.[33] And in her personal retinue, Pompadour herself held "two negroes," as they were described in an account of her expenses.[34]

These injustices might seem far removed from the world of Pompadour's toilette. But in a colonial economy in which skin colorants traveled to Europe aboard the same ships that transported enslaved people across the Atlantic, the two domains were intimately intertwined. And in a society that sought to rationalize these injustices through the nascent pseudoscience of skin color, the brutality of slavery and the refinement of the toilette were more closely linked than we might think.

Pompadour did not, so far as we know, record any reflections on skin color in writing. Our main guide to her understanding of skin color comes from the works of art that she commissioned. In this respect, it is helpful, by way of conclusion, to compare Boucher's portrait with a different painting commissioned by

29. Robert Louis Stein, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 211.

30. Ibid., 27.

31. Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, *Les traites négrières: Essai d'histoire globale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 140.

32. For the first ship, see Éric Saugera, *Bordeaux, port négrier: Chronologie, économie, idéologie, XVIIe-XIXe siècles* (Biarritz: J & D éditions, 1995), 303–4, 352. The 150-ton ship was in service by November 1748. Jean Mettas, *Répertoire des expéditions négrières françaises au XVIIIe siècle*, vol. 2 (Paris: Société française d'histoire d'outre-mer, 1984), 24. The second ship, listed at 260 tons, was registered at the port of Le Havre in 1753 under the ownership of Jean Féray, a well-known slave trader. Dardel, *Navires et marchandises dans les ports de Rouen et du Havre au XVIIIe siècle*, 527. It was seized by the British Navy in 1756 on its way back to Le Havre from Martinique during the blockade instituted in the course of the Seven Years' War. *The Gentleman's Magazine* 26 (1756): 452.

33. The ceremony was described at the time by the Marquis d'Argenson; see René-Louis de Voyer, Marquis d'Argenson, *Mémoires et journal inédit du marquis d'Argenson, ministre des affaires étrangères sous Louis XV*, vol. 3 (1857), 288. Edouard Delobette has identified the ship in the maritime records of the Archives départementales de Seine-Maritime, where it is listed under the ownership of Jean Féray; see Edouard Delobe "Négociants et traite des Noirs au Havre au XVIIIe siècle," *Annales de Norma* 48 (3) (1998): 294n107. Tonnage, in the context o eighteenth-century nauti records, does not measure a ship's weight but the volume of its cargo-carry capacity. At the time, on ton translated to 1.44 cu meters. Stein, *The Frenc Slave Trade in the Eighte Century*, 70–71.

34. Pompadour did not spe their names, listing the simply as "deux nègres." "Relevé des dépenses de Madame de Pompadour," in *Mémoires de la Société d sciences morales, des le et des arts de Seine-et-* vol. 3 (1853), 144.

Fig. 5
Carle Vanloo, *Sultana Drinking Coffee*, 1755. Oil on canvas, 120 × 127 cm. State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Entered the Hermitage in 1782, ГЭ-7489.

Pompadour, one that deals more explicitly with the place of skin color in global commerce (Fig. 5).

Painted in 1755 by Carle Vanloo, it depicts Pompadour in the guise of a sultana in a Middle Eastern harem, attended by a Black woman.[35] The painting was exhibited at the Salon the following year under the title *A Sultana Taking Coffee Presented to Her by a Negress*.[36] Viewers immediately recognized that the "sultana" was meant to represent Pompadour.[37]

35. On the circumstances of the commission, see Perrin Stein, "Madame de Pompadour and the Harem Imagery at Bellevue," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 123 (January 1994): 29–44.

Fig. 6
Jean-Marc Nattier, *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (Mademoiselle de Clermont as a Sultana), 1733. Oil on canvas, 109 × 104.5 cm. The Wallace Collection, London, P456.

The conceit was a familiar one. In the preceding decades, it had become fashionable for European women to commission portraits of themselves dressed *à la Turque*, often appearing alongside people of color who attend to their needs. The key elements of the genre were established by such well-known examples as Jean-Marc Nattier's *Mademoiselle de Clermont en Sultane* (Mademoiselle de Clermont as a Sultana; Fig. 6), in which dark-skinned figures dutifully serve their white mistress, gazing upon her with adoration.

36. *Explication des peintures, sculptures, et gravures de messieurs de l'Académie Royale* (1755), no. 17.

37. Baillet de Saint-Julien, *Seconde lettre à un partisan du bon goût sur l'exposition des tableaux faite dans le grand Salon du Louvre* (1755), 5; and Antoine-Nicolas Dezallier d'Argenville, *Voyage pittoresque des environs de Paris ou Description des maisons royales, châteaux & autres lieux de plaisance, situés quinze lieues aux environs de cette ville* (1755), 28.

Various commodities, from pearls to textiles, function as analogues to the white woman's skin, highlighting whiteness as a defining quality of beauty.

Vanloo's portrait of Pompadour compresses these metaphors into a single object: the coffee cup that passes between the women's hands. But here the metaphor carries a complex message. The painting invites us not only to connect the white ceramic cup with Pompadour's porcelain skin, but also to link the attendant's complexion with the black beverage that she serves. The analogy goes deeper than a simple visual comparison. Coffee, a newly fashionable luxury good harvested by enslaved people in European colonies, points both to the Black woman's skin color and to her transformation into a commodity traded across oceans.[38] White ceramic, too, carries a layered meaning in this context, Pompadour being an instrumental sponsor of French porcelain production.[39] Taken together, the analogies force us to consider both women—and skin colors—as products of commerce. There is no question, of course, that the painting positions the Black woman as subservient to Pompadour, doing little to challenge the hierarchies of skin color that Europeans were constructing at this time. But it also calls attention to the way these hierarchies were determined by commercial interests, how perceptions of bodily difference were conditioned by markets as much as they were determined by nature.

It is in this commercial understanding of skin that the harem scene sheds light on Boucher's portrait of Pompadour. Both paintings show an awareness of how complexion was being redefined through the logic of commerce—the way skin could be manufactured, packaged, and sold. During a period when Enlightenment naturalists and anatomists were searching for physiological explanations to bolster theories of racial difference, the paintings that Pompadour commissioned presented skin through an alternative lens.[40] The makeup that she applies to her face at her toilette, like the ceramic cup she holds in her hand in the harem, reminds

38. On the ties between coffee and slavery in the French Caribbean, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Motion in the System: Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint-Domingue," *Review* 5 (3) (Winter 1982): 331–88.

39. On this topic, see Gabriella Szalay's essay in this volume.

40. On the anatomical study of racial difference at this time, see especially Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness*.

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us that her whiteness is not a privilege accorded by nature, but a quality that is culturally produced, purchased, and staged.

Boucher's portrait has been celebrated as a canny performance of identity, a bold assertion of female autonomy and social mobility. A more global understanding of the portrait makes clear that its performative dimensions go deeper. In the theater of the toilette, Pompadour poses herself at the intersection of gender, class, and emergent racial identities. Each facet of her persona implies its own narrative, from female empowerment to colonial exploitation. But these stories are not mutually exclusive. In painting herself pink, Pompadour demonstrated that she could ably perform more roles than one.

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