



The Portraits of Madame de Pompadour: Celebrating the Femme Savante (The Discovery Series)

Elise Goodman

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The femme savante portraits of Mme de Pompadour (1721–1764), the beautiful and cultivated woman who became the official mistress of Louis XV, are the focus of Elise Goodman's innovative study. The portraits are generally admired as the most glamorous, celebrated likenesses of a woman created during the French Enlightenment, and Goodman's book is the first to fully examine them in the context of the highly saturated feminist atmosphere that existed at the time.

Goodman is interested in the iconography of the portraits, especially as seen in three works done by François Boucher and one each by Maurice-Quentin de La Tour and François-Hubert Drouais. The overarching theme of the portraits is the celebration of a woman of beauty, intelligence, and sophistication. Mme de Pompadour was interested in the world of intellect and culture throughout her life and successfully fashioned herself into the most famous learned woman of the Enlightenment.

Drawing from the memoirs of Pompadour's contemporaries and from primary and secondary sources in several disciplines, Goodman's wide-ranging study examines the treatment of the educated woman in French eighteenth-century portraiture and culture. She discusses the relevance of the socio-cultural debate dubbed the "Women's Quarrel," in which liberal writers campaigned for equity in women's education, and the Parisian salon, the primary arena in which intellectual women educated themselves and contributed to Enlightenment culture.

While Goodman agrees with those who assume that Pompadour commissioned images of herself that would proclaim her cultural agendas—and enhance her status at court—she situates these portraits within the larger context of how cultivated women were represented in the Enlightenment. As was true of likenesses of woman readers, scientists, and musicians, Pompadour's portraits are imbued with progressive ideas on women's intellectuality and education. Abundantly illustrated, this is a book with great appeal for art historians, French cultural historians, women's studies specialists, and a wide audience of general readers.

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