

# TEACHERS' NOTES



# ‘MADAME DE POMPADOUR AT HER TAMBOUR FRAME’ 1763–4

OIL ON CANVAS  
217 x 156.8 CM

FRANÇOIS-HUBERT DROUVAIS



© The National Gallery, London

## INTRODUCTION

While this portrait might intimidate us with its royal scale, the pleasant, open and smiling face of its life-size sitter looks out and welcomes the viewer. The subject, who appears to have been interrupted from her handiwork by our intrusion, is the Marquise de Pompadour, the one-time mistress of Louis XV, King of France.

Painted between 1763 and 1764, this is the last portrait of the marquise, who was also known as Madame de Pompadour. It is a grand, yet intimate painting of a celebrated figure of 18th-century France, which anchors the marquise in our memory as she would wish to have been remembered: erudite, wealthy and industrious, yet carefree, fashionable and charming.

## ABOUT THE PAINTING

### What can you see?

In spite of first appearances, the painting does not show a haphazardly captured moment in time. It is a carefully constructed composition with the sitter sitting boldly upright at the very centre. The black line of her so-called tambour frame, at which she is embroidering with coloured threads, divides the canvas horizontally, while one of its legs creates a strong vertical. The red curtain that falls on the left hand side of the picture lines up with the silk underlining of her gown, further dividing the composition diagonally, from the top left to the bottom right hand corners.

The rigour of the composition works in contrast to the informal qualities of the painting. Madame de Pompadour is seen at her leisure and Drouais faithfully records her pursuits and interests. She is surrounded by her books, which line the elaborately carved and gilded bookcase behind her. A mandolin rests on the floor in the foreground beside a red artist's portfolio, filled with prints and drawings. On the right, there is a lavish worktable, which stores her coloured wools with a precariously balanced

charcoal holder. Her hands are poised over her embroidery, while her faithful dog jumps up to greet his mistress. She is wearing a sumptuously embroidered silk dress, edged with yards of lace and ribbons. Her hair is set in a fashionable style. We are left in no doubt that this is a woman not only of great wealth, but also of great learning.

## WHO WAS MADAME DE POMPADOUR?

The royal mistress looks up confidently as she might have done at the King when he visited her in her private apartments at court. But the Marquise de Pompadour had not begun life in such splendour, nor with such status. Born on 29 December 1721 as Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, her father was a financier whose own father had been a weaver from Champagne. Having acquired wealth in banking, her family could be described as bourgeois, but she did not have the connections or birth expected at court. However, her background and upbringing was filled with intrigue as her mother was known to have had many lovers, some of whom were of high social standing. These included Charles-François Lenormant de Tournehem a royal tax collector who financed Jeanne-Antoinette's education. This has led to speculation over whether he was her biological father.

Having begun her formal education in a convent school, the young Jean-Antoinette was then privately educated by tutors, who included some of the most celebrated actors, dancers, opera singers and performers of the day. Taught elocution, dancing, singing and how to play instruments, her abilities as a performer were complemented by her beauty and charm. A contemporary courtier, Dufort de Chevigny, recalled that she was:

‘A woman any man would have wanted as a mistress ... she had an oval face, very regular features, a magnificent complexion, quite superb hands and arms, eyes which were pretty if on the smallish side, yet she possessed a fieriness, an

intelligence and a brilliance that I have never seen in any other woman.'

She moved in the elite cultural circles of Paris and frequented the literary gatherings of the most eminent minds of the period. Later, she also hosted gatherings of her own. Voltaire, among the most brilliant figures of the French Enlightenment, attended her salon. Groomed by her family and guardian to become an eligible consort, she married Tournehem's nephew and heir Charles-Guillaume Lenormant d'Étiolles and settled on an estate bordering the King's hunting ground. It is thought that she came to the monarch's attention and eventually became his official mistress. To make the liaison seemingly respectable, she separated from her husband and was ennobled. She was given land and the title of Marquise de Pompadour in 1745.

## DESTINED TO BE A ROYAL MISTRESS

The story goes that at the age of nine, a fortune-teller told Jeanne-Antoinette that she would reign over the heart of a king. From that time on her family nickname had been *Reinette* – 'Queeny' in French. Though this sounds like the stuff of myth, royal records show that a certain 'Dames Lebon' was listed as one of her pensioners and received the enormous sum of 600 French livres for having predicted that she would become Louis XV's mistress.

## LIFE AT THE COURT OF LOUIS XV

In the French court of the 18th century, the royal mistress had become a near-formal position, even if the role was not acknowledged constitutionally and could cause some embarrassment. Court life was ruled by complex convention and etiquette. Louis XV had become king in 1715 at the age of five. He succeeded to the throne after the death of his great-grandfather, the well-remembered 'Sun King' Louis XIV, and the successive deaths of his father, grandfather, mother, brother and uncle. Perhaps unsurprisingly, his contemporaries noted his melancholy and his courtiers agreed that he had a need for cheerful diversions from the trying nature of rule and court.

The Marquise de Pompadour did much to alleviate his moods by organising performances and entertainments. As such, she had a huge influence on the cultural life of the court and of France. Indeed, the King, who enjoyed dances and masquerades, had wooed Madame de Pompadour by organising a masked ball. She arrived disguised as a shepherdess, while the monarch chose to dress up as a tree!

Later, her status and power was not constrained by her status as royal lover. Even after their physical relationship came to an end in around 1751–2, she remained a close confidant of the king. Over two decades the Marquise de Pompadour took the role of close friend, personal confidant, policy consultant, governmental aide, cultural impresario and artistic patron. Some even considered her to have taken on the role of a de facto prime minister. Having gained so much influence – and having begun life as plain Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson – she attracted as many enemies as she did supporters. To the nobility, she remained

a derided member of the bourgeois class, who they resented. What is certain is that her affection, her charm, and above all her interest in music and the arts made her a considerable figure in a society where women almost universally had highly restrained roles.

## PATRONAGE

With her status and power, the Marquise of Pompadour helped to promote French luxury goods through her patronage. She was particularly associated with the manufacture of Sèvres porcelain, as well as contemporary furniture and tapestry. The furniture included in the painting reflects well her taste and in her interest in varied Rococo styles. While the glazed bookcase is decorated with lavish gilt-bronze, she is seated on a more restrained carved and gilded seat, upholstered in silk. Meanwhile the tri-pod work table is in the new fashionable 'Greek style', very likely to have been made by the celebrated furniture maker Oeben, who was favoured at court at the time.

## THE ARTIST

François-Hubert Drouais (1727 – 1775) was the son of the painter Hubert Drouais, with whom he began his artistic education. He later trained with other well-known artists of the time including Carle van Loo, Charles-Joseph Natoire and François Boucher. He made his reputation as a portraitist associated with the French court and was reputed for his portraits of aristocratic figures and children, often dressed up as gardeners, shepherds or in rustic costumes to emphasize their 'natural' character, as was the fashion at the time. Drouais was the successor of Jean-Marc Nattier as chief portraitist to the royal court, and made paintings of the leading figures of the age, including the preceding mistress to Louis XV, Madame du Barry. The King himself sat for Drouais in 1772. His style strikes a balance between the old grandeur and imposing style of the Baroque era and the endlessly flowing and decorative nature of the Rococo age to which he belonged.

## PORTRAITURE AND SYMBOLISM

This picture is the last portrait made of Madame de Pompadour before her death from the continued poor health that had plagued her life. An inscription on one of the Sèvres plaques in the painting, which decorate the work-table, tells us, that Drouais painted the marquise's face from the life in April 1763 but finished this large painting some time later by stitching her painted portrait onto a larger canvas. You can see the placement of the seam of the smaller head portrait where there is a slight change in the grey tone of the background. The painting was finally completed a few weeks after the marquise's death on 5 April 1764 at the age of 43. As was necessary in order to construct the public image of the sitter, Madame de Pompadour is portrayed using imagery which conveys virtue and industry. In order to flatter the great lady, symbolism of her fidelity is made present by the inclusion of her faithful pet. The dog is likely to be a portrait of one of her King Charles spaniels 'Mimi' or 'Inès'.

# USING THE PICTURE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

## STARTING POINTS

- Set the scene: Show images of the exterior and interior of the Palace of Versailles, visit a local stately home, or play music from the time to stimulate the senses
- Pass around objects from the painting in a canvas bag so that the children can feel and describe them.

### Strategies to Support Looking

- Describe the painting to someone who cannot see it.
- Have a look...have a closer look...what have you noticed that others may not have seen?
- Draw the painting without taking the pencil off the paper

### Open questions to initiate dialogue

- What do you think the room where the painting hung would have looked like?
- What might the artist, Drouais, be trying to tell us about this lady?
- What does luxury mean to you? Explore children's responses and the reasons for them.

## LINES OF ENQUIRY

Lines of enquiry begin with themes in the painting and extend to make meaningful connections with broader learning experiences. Projects that enrich learning will emerge as you explore the different contexts and possibilities that the painting created for you and your pupils.

### Portraiture and the Depiction of the Courtiers and Monarchy:

Female portraits versus male subjects: how does this painting compare to another of Drouais's portraits of a man in the National Gallery's collection, *Le Comte de Vaudreuil*, (1758), NG 4253.

Think about today's royal portraits. How is the monarchy depicted today? How is the current generation of the British Royal Family photographed? How is their power depicted?

### Fashion and Industry

Along with wearing the most sophisticated new dress designs made of expensive embroidered silks, Madame de Pompadour was famed for her hairstyles. She is credited for the naming of the 'pompom' that she used in her coiffures. She is also depicted with a *Tête de mouton* hairstyle and has purposely greyed her hair. How does fashion reflect our personality? Who decides what is fashionable? How are these luxury goods manufactured and at what cost for the workforce?

### Literature and Public Perception

How and why did Madame de Pompadour cast herself in the role of storyteller to the king? Compare her to other famous storytellers, for example Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights*, who enchants the Persian king with her fantastic tales. Can you write a story fit for a king? Could you turn it into an illustrated book, or a play?

### Identity

Drouais placed the objects in the painting to give the viewer an insight into Madame de Pompadour's identity, her likes and dislikes. How would you like yourself to be shown to the public? Think about which objects could symbolise your personality. What sort of costume would you wear?

### Patronage and Manufacturing

Think about the history of patronage in the decorative arts. Who sets the trends of the objects that surround us? What are today's interior design trends? Look at Sèvres porcelain, Gobelins tapestry, Oeben furniture. What are the contemporary equivalents? How has craftsmanship and manufacturing evolved? What is style?

## WEB LINKS

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/francois-hubert-drouais-le-comte-de-vaudreuil>

<http://www.royal.gov.uk/>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/bbcthree/2010/04/blood-sweat-and-luxuries-what.shtml>

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/burt1k1/>

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/r/rococo/>