WE KNOW a great deal about fad and fashion in the eighteenth century. The purveyors of daily news and gossip in The Gentleman’s Magazine and the Mercure de France were as detailed as any of today’s newspaper columnists, and what they missed can often be supplied by reading such posterity-minded memoirists as Walpole and the Duc de Luynes. But these are verbal records: there were no press photographers to “cover” one of Handel’s concerts, or the opening of a Salon, or a new suite of rooms at Versailles; topical engravings were relatively few and unspecific. Historians and curators are thus continually being teased by descriptions of reporters and letter writers for which there are no visual parallels. What may be a unique exception to this is the visual testimony of the popularity of Mercury Fastening His Sandal, Jean Baptiste Pigalle’s first important piece of sculpture.

The original terracotta (Figure 1), now in the Metropolitan Museum, is considered to have been executed between 1736 and 1739, during Pigalle’s student days in Rome. Pigalle returned to Paris with his statuette but for some reason did not keep it; in 1767 it was sold from the collection of a M. de Jullienne and returned to the artist. Mercury went out of the family again during the Revolution, and a century later came into the successive ownerships of the Comte de Bryas and Benjamin Altman. It arrived at the Metropolitan in 1913 as part of the Altman bequest.

Upon Pigalle’s return to Paris, he exhibited the terracotta in the Salon of 1741, where it instantly won praise not only from the public


but also from Louis XV, who commissioned the sculptor to enlarge it to life size and provide it with a companion figure. The King wished to present the pair to Frederick the Great—in a passing moment of amity—as ornaments for the Emperor’s garden at Sans Souci. Pigalle accepted the commission, choosing as his subject an episode from a fable by La Fontaine in which Venus requests Mercury to find Psyche. The pair of figures was originally entitled Venus Giving a Message to Mercury, but Venus—an afterthought virtually imposed on the artist—never enjoyed the popularity of her companion.

Between 1741 and 1748, when the life-size marble statues of Mercury and Venus were finished and sent on their long journey to Potsdam, the two divinities appeared in a variety of sizes and materials. Plaster studies of both figures were exhibited in the Salon of 1742; two years later Pigalle was received into the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture on the strength of a marble statuette of Mercury. In 1747 a full-size plaster model of Venus was shown in the Salon. These replicas of the two statues probably represent only a small portion of the total number of examples executed by Pigalle or in his studio. In an age that lacked photography the amateur had several ways of “owning” his favorite paintings and sculptures. Engravings of paintings were within easy reach of all, while the serious, and wealthy, collector could buy or even commission a duplicate. Of a favorite piece of sculpture there might be several dozen workshop casts, as well as a smaller number from the hand of the artist himself. It is a romantic notion to consider a painting or sculpture as a unique creation. To the unsentimental artists of previous centuries, it was perfectly justifiable to repeat their works: duplication reflected unfavorably neither on their imaginative powers nor on the value of their works. It is thus not remarkable that there should be sixteen recorded contemporary versions of Pigalle’s Mercury—in terracotta, plaster, marble, lead, and stone, in the sizes of both the original terracotta and of the large final work—and, in addition, a number of later copies in other media and sizes.

Even this routine number of examples of Mercury would not have been produced, however, had it not been for the fact that the figure was astonishingly popular. To Pigalle’s contemporaries the figure combined the merits of a classical subject, superb craftsmanship, and a virile grace characteristic of the rococo. Its appeal was to the intellect and the senses alike. But if Mercury was a popular favorite, it was no less enthusiastically received by other artists, who paid tribute to Pigalle by including portraits of the sculpture in their own work.

It was in acknowledgment of its technical excellence that Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin first painted Mercury in 1747. In The Drawing Lesson, the young draughtsman is copying a plaster version of the statuette, indicating, one commentator wrote, that “notre École peut fournir les modèles les plus purs de la correction du dessein” (our school can offer the purest models for correct drawing). The original painting was sent to the Swedish court, but the following year Chardin painted a duplicate for the collector La Live de Jully. In 1757 Jacques Philippe Le Bas exhibited his engraving of the original, through which the painting is best known today (Figure 2). In 1766 Chardin portrayed Mercury again, this time in his three repetitions of The Attributes of the Arts and the Rewards Granted to Them. The first of the three was painted for that indefatigable Francophile Catherine the Great. It was followed in the same year by duplicates for the Marquis de Marigny and the Abbé Pommyer, the last version being now in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Figure 3).

In both his paintings Chardin used Mercury as an academic ideal: he made little attempt to reproduce the vitality and sensuous grace of the original, even choosing, in the Attributes, to paint the figure head-on, its least rococo silhouette. But to an artist of the following generation, Hubert Robert, the inherent picturesqueness of Mercury became its chief attraction. Robert belonged to the age
4. The Terrace of the Château de Marly, by Hubert Robert.
Oil on canvas. Nelson Gallery – Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri, Nelson Fund
of burgeoning romanticism, of the *jardin anglais*, and was himself landscape gardener as well as painter. It will be recalled that the figures presented to Frederick the Great were intended as garden ornaments, so it was natural that Robert should portray Mercury in its larger, garden version. In *The Bathing Pool* (Cover), one of six panels painted between 1777 and 1784 for the Château de Bagatelle, Robert has transposed the young god and his companion to an imaginary Italianate garden that includes all the elements of the picturesque: a partly ruined classical temple hidden in a grove, blasted trees, a quiet pool, and ornaments of jardinières, fountains, and Pigalle’s rococo deities. Robert emphasizes the Arcadian aspect of Mercury again in another landscape, *The Terrace of the Château de Marly* (Figure 4). Like *The Bathing Pool*, this, too, represents a composite setting; no version of the statue is traceable to Marly, and we must assume that the artist was less concerned with recording fact than he was with defining his ideal landscape park.

In addition to these painted likenesses, Mercury was popularized in another fashion. Toward the end of the eighteenth century ceramic manufactories—taking advantage of a material almost as viable as any used by the sculptors—began to make miniature copies of famous works of classical and modern sculpture in porcelain. In 1770 Mercury appeared as a Sévres biscuit figure, its popularity proving such that it is still being produced today (Figure 5). And across the Channel, nine years later, Benjamin Grant received £2 for modeling a “Setting Figure of Mercury,” which appeared in 1787 among Josiah Wedgwood’s black basalt wares (Figure 6).

We cannot know which versions of Mercury served as models for its portraitists, but we do know that examples of the statuette were collected by artists as well as painted by them. Chardin, a close friend of Pigalle’s, probably owned the plaster he painted twice and once drew in charcoal; the engraver Pierre François Basan bought a plaster version in 1778; another is found in the inventory of the sculptor Clodion’s effects in 1814. Still
another—also one we can assume to have been owned by the artist—appears in Louis Léopold Boilly's The Artist's Wife in His Studio (Figure 7). Here, in a work painted during the Empire, the artistic break with the ancien régime caused by the Revolution is ignored: for Boilly, Mercury Fastening His Sandal was the supreme example of modern sculpture, as it had been for so many in Pigalle's own lifetime.

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