Unlike much of the writing on rococo artists of the eighteenth century, Jean-Marc Nattier’s (1685-1766) work has remained largely understudied. The French painter, who was notably associated with portraiture of the first half of the century, has historically been seen as the creator of simple mythological creations for the elite women of Louis XV’s court. Although this may be the case, he did in fact contribute to a surge in portraiture that followed the tradition of allegorical styles of the past. Nattier was known for this style, artfully turning his sitters into Greek and Roman gods or goddesses placed within the theatrical worlds of mythological settings. This led to his longstanding position as one the leading portraitists within the world of the Parisian high society and court—a place where one’s image and representation to the public were not always meant to stay true to reality. Much like the allegorical depictions of Louis XIV and XV as Apollo, or Madame de Pompadour as Venus, these characteristics would be transferred from mythology and applied to reality through images.

The creation of an identity and image of oneself was a critical component of eighteenth-century French society. Influence from courtly deportment, theatre, and class differentiation, produced ideal situations of class ambiguity that were continually dealt with in all social settings. I would propose that Jean-Marc Nattier’s œuvre served as the grounds by which we might consider how aristocratic traditions in portraiture were transferred from the elite to the middle class.