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17 & 18 Century Art

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## WATTEAU AND THE THEATRE

Jean-Antoine Watteau was a well known artist in France in the early 18th century. He started his short life on October 10, 1684 in Valenciennes and died July 18, 1721.<sup>1</sup> While he was living in his hometown he apprenticed under Jaques-Albert Gérin, a local master, for three years before he left his provincial life to make his way to Paris.<sup>2</sup> It is likely that when he went to Paris he associated with Flemish artists as it had been less than three decades since France had acquired Valenciennes.<sup>3</sup> Valenciennes still had a strong Flemish community and was not yet truly accepted to be French by other French citizens.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that Watteau felt more comfortable in the presence of Flemish artists. He met many artists in his circle including Jaques Spoëde, an artist from Antwerp, who would later introduce Watteau to his first dealer, Pierre Sirois.<sup>5</sup>

Once in Paris, Watteau started to work under an artist who was known for painting theatre scenery.<sup>6</sup> That artist soon left Paris and sometime after that Watteau met Claude Gillot, also a painter of scenery.<sup>7</sup> Watteau apprenticed under Gillot for a time but the exact years are uncertain.<sup>8</sup> Gillot was an obvious inspiration to Watteau, especially in

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<sup>1</sup> M. Gauthier, *Watteau*, (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Posner, *Antoine Watteau*, (Cornell University Press: Ithica, 1984), 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Posner, *Antoine Watteau*, (Cornell University Press: Ithica, 1984), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Eidelberg, "Watteau and Gillot: A Point of Contact," *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 115, No. 841, (April, 1973) 232.

his images of performers and actors. It was even said by the Comte de Caylus, a contemporary of Watteau, that Watteau's tastes were definitively formed through Gillot.<sup>9</sup> The styles of the two artists were so alike that drawings by Gillot were often erroneously attributed to Watteau and then reattributed to Gillot.<sup>10</sup>

A trendy subject of paintings in France at the time was scenes involving the visiting Italian troupes of commedia dell'arte players.<sup>11</sup> The company was expelled from the city of Paris in 1697 by Louis XIV for an allegedly insulting play directed towards Madame de Maintenon.<sup>12</sup> This act likely fueled the desire for images of commedia dell'arte and Watteau later painted their expulsion from the city. The painting has since been lost. One can only imagine that then, like now, scandalous attention to a subject helps to sell products having to do with that subject.

Gillot and Watteau both painted and made drawings and engravings of scenes or individuals that were related to the commedia dell'arte. One well-known painting by Watteau is, *Mezzetin*, circa 1720. (fig.1) *Mezzetin*, whose name means half-measure, was a stock character in Italian commedia dell'arte.<sup>13</sup> This painting is a typical example of French Rococo art. It depicts *Mezzetin* sitting on a bench and playing a stringed instrument. He is looking longingly up to the heavens, perhaps lamenting unrequited love. During this time period in France there was a romanticized view of love affairs amongst the nobility. Love was often considered to be an unscrupulous game of wits

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Hertz, "Watteau's Italian Comedians," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2, (Winter 1988-1989), 156.

<sup>12</sup> Posner, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Metropolitan Museum of Art, Timeline of Art History, Jean-Antoine Watteau: *Mezzetan*, [http://www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/HD/watt/ho\\_34.138.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/HD/watt/ho_34.138.htm)

leaving someone hurt and longing as was fictionally well-documented in the novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuse*.

In the background of the painting there is a woman facing away from Mezzetin. The woman is painted in shades of grey and stands in an opening in the forest-like setting behind Mezzetin. Since she is painted in greys there is the possibility that she is a statue and not a real woman at all. On the other hand she may just be standing in shadow and is perhaps the woman that Mezzetin longs for or she may be an allegorical figure representing love. With her back to Mezzetin it would be symbolic of how love had turned away from him.

What is interesting is that the background trees and the woman actually look like they are painted stage scenery and are not a life-like as Mezzetin on his bench or the branches and leaves around him. This must have been intentional as it is a scene of a character of *commedia dell'arte* and not just any man sitting out in nature playing music. He is a character on a stage and Watteau's training as a painter of theatre scenery certainly comes into play in this piece. His beginnings in scenery painting must also have been a very strong influence on his later paintings and drawings. Many of his compositions have the figures set up like actors on a stage.

Another piece by Watteau that is related to the theatre is his *Fêtes Vénétiennes*, done 1718-1719, the same time period that *Mezzetin* was done in. It was inspired by the story of a ballet named *Feste Veneziane*.<sup>14</sup> Although not directly from the *commedia dell'arte* it is still a painting having to do with the theatre and performance. This piece is compositionally similar to *Mezzetin* only with more figures in the scene. There is a stone wall to the right, a forest setting with a clearing in the trees to the left and the figures in

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<sup>14</sup> Gauthier, 49.

the front and center as the main focus of the piece. This compositional formula seemed to have been in the comfort zone of Watteau as he used it often.

*Fêtes Vénétiennes* looks like it could be a snapshot of a performance. The background looks like stage scenery. There is a nude woman reclining on her side on top of the wall. Just as in the *Mezzetin* painting the woman is painted in greys only with no color. This puts forth the question of whether this woman is real, a statue or part of the painted scenery. The rest of the figures are lavishly dressed indicating they are part of the upper class. This theme is considered a *fête galante* scene which is a variant Watteau came up with on the *fête champêtre* genre scenes which depict parties and gatherings of the upper class in idealized outdoor settings.<sup>15</sup>

The theatrical scenes painted by Watteau were beautiful and delicate images that were coveted by French high society at the time. Although Watteau was trained and inspired by Gillot he seemed to have surpassed him in skill. Watteau was able to make a figure glow with soft lighting. He was so adept, that the fabrics of the clothing he painted shimmered and looked as if one could touch it and actually feel the soft satin or silk. His works are exceptional examples of theatrical subjects in French art.

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<sup>15</sup> Ian Chilvers, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art & Artists*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 179.



fig 1. *Mezzetin*, c. 1718-1720, Metropolitan Museum

of Art, New York.



fig. 2. *Fêtes Vénétienes*, 1718-1719, National

Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

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