

Watteau

Jean Antoine Watteau, one of the most brilliant of French artists, was born in Valenciennes, six years after that Flemish city became a part of France. His earliest influences were Flemish, for in Valenciennes, his teacher worked in a seventeenth-century Mannerist genre style. Watteau went to Paris in 1702, and from 1704 to 1708, worked with Claude Gillot on sets for the theater, especially the Italian Commedia dell' Arte. Still poor and unknown, he was taken in by Claude Audran, painter and Curator of the Luxembourg Palace.

Audran taught Watteau the delicate art of painting on a white ground, and Watteau studied Rubens' famous Medici series and drew views of the palace gardens. In about 1708 his small and human battle paintings attracted the attention of perceptive dealers, collectors, and well-known imitators of Rubens. He was invited by the financier Crovat to live and work in his home filled with Venetian and Flemish paintings and drawings and soon developed a new type of subject: paintings of elegant ladies and gentlemen enjoying themselves in magnificent landscapes, the fêtes galantes.

Although the Louvre version of The Embarkation for Cythera led to Watteau's acceptance by the Academy in 1717, he was admitted more on the basis of his entire body of work than for this particular painting. At about this time he also painted a series of romantic fantasies on theatrical subjects. In 1719, already seriously ill with tuberculosis, Watteau went to England to consult Queen Anne's physician who became his patron and friend. Watteau died two years later in the country-side near Paris. The rigid academicism that had existed under Louis XIV had come to an end in 1715.

In the brief twenty years of his career Watteau's delicate, graceful imagery, haunting nostalgia, harmonious backgrounds, and moving theatricality summed up the poetic freedom and emotional warmth that were the best qualities of the eighteenth century. His ablest followers, Lancret and Pater, substituted a surface optimism for his lyrical poetry, and later in the century, Fragonard, in his gay and reckless manner symbolized, perhaps unconsciously, the final desperate defiance of a doomed society.

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