

Watteau's Ambiguity

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This Chinoiserie plate from the Mint Museum's Delhom collection exemplifies the whimsical, decorative, and at times playful style of art that was prevalent in eighteenth-century France. Inspired by Chinese art, the scene depicted demonstrates the French aristocracy's infatuation with the exotic, as well as the widespread taste for intimate, pleasing pieces of art. Works that incorporated oriental motifs excited members of this wealthy, well-educated class whose primary goals were to enjoy their leisure time, to flaunt their social status, and, above all, to avoid boredom. While the art of the first half of the eighteenth century is regarded in its entirety as the embodiment of aristocratic pleasure, the art of Jean-Antoine Watteau is consistently distinguished as the epitome of aristocratic escapism. As is illustrated here in the Louvre version of the *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, Watteau's images of fanciful couples relishing in music, nature, and pleasant company spoke to the sentiments of an eighteenth-century nobility that awaited the approaching end of the oppressive reign of Louis XIV. Although these *fete galantes* greatly contributed to Watteau's success as a renowned painter of French society, they also became the source of his demise; taste shifted in the mid-eighteenth century, and the French gradually rejected artistic displays of the delights of the leisure class in exchange for a more rustic, moralizing type of art, like that of Jean-Baptiste Greuze, whose work *The Broken Eggs* is shown here on the right. Once revered for his visually seductive depictions of contemporary aristocrats, Watteau was now criticized for ignoring the traditional, "noble" themes of the French Academy's most prestigious genre of painting – the history painting. A proper history painting incorporated a clear narrative structure, readable gestures, and moral substance in one coherent composition, as is demonstrated by this work, Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii*. Akin to the Delhom Chinoiserie plate, Watteau's dream-like paintings conspicuously lacked these characteristics. With the increasing emphasis on history painting and the growing popularity of

Neoclassicism, the pleasures of the *fete galante* that had secured Watteau's fame at the beginning of the century became symbols of social depravity at its conclusion. Considered fleeting, trivial, and the property of a self-indulgent generation, Watteau's works, like this *Venetian Pleasures*, were cast aside in favor of a supposedly more meaningful type of art.

Entranced by his technical mastery and beautiful canvases, scholars, writers, and connoisseurs have avidly refuted this negative conception of Watteau for over two-hundred years. Watteau's assortment of supporters has endeavored to reveal the complexities and insights inherent in the artist's images that the late eighteenth-century Neoclassicists claimed were absent. Watteau's paintings, however, are defiantly ambiguous. They lack explicit references to narrative, making the subject matter appear absent or merely decorative. Figures seem to interact, but no actions are too overt, no facial expressions too animated, as to reveal the content of the unwritten exchange. Even Watteau's brushstrokes taunt the viewer, decisive enough to form figures and settings yet unpolished enough to reveal their artifice. Marked by subtle gestures, painterly brushstrokes, and broken narratives, these paintings frequently resist explanation, making it problematic for Watteau's advocates to defend the artist as a painter of significant things; the eighteenth-century interpretation of Watteau's works as superficial and insignificant is difficult to disprove when figures, gestures, and whole compositions do not seem to express a definite meaning. Consequently, the key to understanding the meaning of these paintings seemingly exists in the realm of their ambiguity. From the eighteenth-century to present day, Watteau supporters and scholars have attempted to decipher the meaning of Watteau's ambiguity with the aim of establishing the artist and his works as significant. In this paper, I will discuss the ways modern art historians approach and define this ambiguity. I will explore how and possibly why modern scholars are still driven to prove Watteau's worth in a

surprisingly old-fashioned manner, and I hope to demonstrate that Watteau's ambiguity needs to be examined from a new perspective.

Before I can consider more recent scholarship, I need to discuss the previous interpretations of Watteau's inherently ambiguous paintings. For Watteau's earliest supporters in eighteenth-century France, his works brought to life the pleasure-seeking attitude of an elite class, and the ambiguity in his images did not prevent these self-assured aristocrats from reveling in his artistic skill. For Watteau's earliest critics the situation was equally uncomplicated: they saw ambiguous paintings as being subject-less, and, as all good history painting conveyed an apparent subject, Watteau's images were therefore less than significant. This unfavorable assessment of Watteau lingered until the nineteenth century, when a nostalgia for the sophistication and style of the ancien regime pervaded French society and the artist's legacy was revived. Charmed by the elegance of his paintings, Romantic writers were drawn to early biographies of Watteau that described him as unsociable and chronically ill, a perpetual outsider to the world he painted. Writers like Arsene Houssaye, Charles Le Blanc, and the Goucourt brothers were fascinated with this image of a sickly yet prophetic artist struggling against society. Through their collective works, these writers granted Watteau his enduring reputation as the melancholic painter who created playful, yet inherently sad, realms of fantasy. Endorsing the artist's reclusive and anxious character as the mark of artistic genius, Watteau's nineteenth-century supporters interpreted the ambiguity of his images in terms of his melancholic nature, finding perceptible gloom behind each playful *fete galante*. For them, ambiguity was not the mark of an inferior genre but rather a sign of a superior artist.

Recognizing the nineteenth-century bias that these romantic writers imparted in their analysis of an eighteenth-century artist, modern art historians have extensively reevaluated the

nature of Watteau's art. In the 1970s and 80s, art historians began incorporating new methods and perspectives into the study of art, and their revisionist ideas encouraged Watteau scholars to examine his paintings in terms of their historical, social and political context. Unsatisfied with the generic artist-as-genius myth that was promoted in the nineteenth century, modern art historians questioned the validity of using Watteau's early biographies to define the artist's work. Some of Watteau's closest associates were also his earliest biographers, and their desire to create a mysterious and embellished account of Watteau's life was motivated by both their friendship with the artist and their own personal gain. Though these eighteenth-century biographies might have accurately described Watteau as being socially reserved, the artist's reticence does not seem to have affected his ability to make a name for himself in French society. By virtue of his friendships with influential men, his acceptance into the prestigious Royal Academy, and his talent for capturing the spirit of the aristocracy in his images, Watteau was seemingly more embedded in his environment than his earliest supporters and nineteenth-century advocates believed. Under the scrutiny of revisionist art historians, Watteau has emerged not as an ailing outsider but as a capable, well-connected member of French society.

Because the image of Watteau as an artist struggling against society is no longer viable, the interpretation of his works as embodying the artist's perpetual state of melancholy is no longer compelling. This notion of Watteau as the melancholic outsider, however, had been a critical component of the nineteenth-century arguments for the significance of Watteau as an artist. In his influential 1984 monograph on the artist, art historian Donald Posner explains the importance of the melancholy motif in the nineteenth-century view of Watteau, writing, "It allowed one to attribute a quality of seriousness, of profundity, to images that appear on the surface trivial or pointless in subject." By rejecting melancholy as the primary undercurrent of

Watteau's images, Posner and his contemporaries have seemingly robbed Watteau of his significance, or at least the significance awarded to him by nineteenth-century writers. This has granted modern scholars a daunting freedom to redefine the artist's ambiguity and thus his significance as an eighteenth-century painter. While it is still agreed that Watteau was a talented artist who cannot be overlooked in the study of French art, the disentangling of myth and melancholy from Watteau's reputation has left scholars searching for new ways to explain his ambiguous imagery without detracting from his distinguished status.

For modern art historians like Donald Posner, Watteau's images are necessarily ambiguous, not because they lack a clear subject, but because the subject they illustrate is inherently vague. Whereas nineteenth-century scholars explained Watteau's ambiguity as the product of a lingering tension between the scene depicted and a melancholic undertone, recent art historians have approached the ambiguity as an integral part of the scene itself. For example, in his 1984 monograph, Posner posits that Watteau's images are puzzling because they reflect the unsteady and mystifying nature of love. He interprets each subtle gesture, each gentle interaction, and each grouping of figures as illustrations of love's many phases. This is not a specific, temporal love, but the embodiment of the ideal of love fulfilled, and thus the figures and the scenes depicted cannot be identified in relation to a specific narrative. Moreover, certain aspects of the paintings cannot be explained because certain parts of love are inexplicable. Posner writes, "Beyond the meanings that can be read in his paintings, Watteau makes us aware of the mystery that is at the heart of love." By explaining the ambiguous nature of Watteau's paintings as a reflection of the uncertain but ultimately satisfying nature of love itself, Posner shows that Watteau portrayed a specific, definable subject. As a result, Watteau's significance is

justified not because he was a struggling genius but because he was an artist able to capture the essence of an elusive subject matter.

Similar to Posner, Thomas M. Kavanagh defines Watteau's ambiguity as the expression of an inherently ambiguous sensation. Though Kavanagh agrees with Posner's assertion that Watteau's images present a specific subject matter, he interprets the works as portrayals of desire instead of love. In his *Esthetics of the Moment: Literature and Art in the French Enlightenment*, published in 1996, Kavanagh analyzes how Watteau's ambiguous compositions communicate moments of desire to the viewer. Aware that Watteau's eighteenth-century critics greatly condemned the lack of narrative in the artist's works, Kavanagh argues that the artist's use of open-ended narratives was the essential component for conveying the nature of Watteau's subject. From Kavanagh's perspective, the exclusion of a narrative allows for the desire expressed in the images to manifest itself more fully. For example, in his examination of the Berlin version of *The Embarkation for Cythera*, Kavanagh notes that the figures are grouped into pairs of intimate couples. These pairs, largely oblivious to the others around them, represent not part of a larger story but, as Kavanagh states, "specific and self-defining moments drawn from the scenarios of desire." According to Kavanagh, these couples, like the figures in Watteau's other works, call upon a pre-conscious awareness of the experience of desire. Not limited by an encompassing narrative, Watteau's figures can personally affect the viewer by promoting a collective notion of desire. Like Posner, Kavanagh explains Watteau's elusive subject matter as the embodiment of an equally elusive feeling. Both art historians identify a specific subject matter in Watteau's works, namely, love and desire, and they both imply that Watteau should be considered a significant eighteenth-century artist because he painted a universally significant and definable subject.

Other modern art historians have attempted to define the ambiguity in terms of its social context. These art historians propose that the images appear ambiguous because they capture the subtleties of eighteenth-century social practices. For example, art historian Mary Vidal explains the subtle gestures and lack of narrative in Watteau's works as reflections of the eighteenth-century art of conversation. Arguing against Posner and Kavanagh, Vidal asserts that Watteau's images are not vague because they express the subjectivity of a feeling, but rather they are vague because they portray the intricacies of a conversation in progress. She relates the artist's loose brushstrokes to the improvisational style of small-talk, and likens the non-narrative quality of the paintings to the open-ended, non-linear path of pleasant conversation. In her 1992 book *Watteau's Painted Conversations* and in her 2006 essay "Style as Subject in Watteau's Images of Conversation," Vidal discusses the overlapping social functions of the act of pleasant conversation and Watteau's depictions of small-talk. In eighteenth-century French society, skill in the art of conversation was a sign of social status, because only members of the aristocracy would have had the appropriate upbringing and sufficient leisure time to engage in an activity of that kind. Vidal claims that the restrained gestures of Watteau's figures exemplify the proper self-control and decorum exhibited by dignified, aristocratic speakers. According to Vidal, these depictions of social interaction were not solely for pleasure. They served as reminders of appropriate aristocratic behavior and alluded to the value of conversation in French culture. Like Watteau's other supporters, Vidal ardently contests the view of Watteau's works as frivolous and superficial, announcing that they are, in her words, "neither devoid of serious content nor simply excuses to demonstrate color and brushwork." By likening the ambiguities of Watteau's images to the art of conversation, which was a socially significant practice for France's eighteenth-century elite, Vidal affirms the significance of Watteau's art for a viewer of any period.

Finally, art historian Julie Anne Plax also relates the ambiguity in Watteau's images to the social practices of the eighteenth-century aristocracy. Differing from Vidal, Plax identifies Watteau's ambiguous images as the visual equivalents of the *fete galante* party and the everyday masquerade. Plax points out that appearances were critical in the world of the French elite, and, as social classes began to shift during the later years of Louis XIV's reign, aristocrats became feverishly committed to upholding their façade of superiority. The *fete galante* party, designed to entertain the leisure class, became a status symbol; those who attended these gatherings and behaved like an aristocrat were perceived to be members of the upper class. As in Watteau's portrayals of these events, *fete galantes* were meant to evoke a mood of fantasy and pleasure, and, though its attendees engaged in the reverie, the true aristocrat always exhibited admirable self-control. Like Vidal, Plax emphasizes the connection between this reserved etiquette of the aristocratic class and the subtle gestures and expressions of Watteau's figures. Although members of the French elite took pride in their prestigious reputation, shifting social classes made it difficult to distinguish the traditional aristocrats from their new wealthy counterparts. As members of a rising class began to appropriate the trademarks of the aristocracy, social status became deceiving, since even those who donned the mask of an aristocrat could turn out to be an imposter. From Plax's perspective, Watteau's images are vague because they blur the distinction between fiction and real life, a distinction that was truly uncertain to members of French elitist society. Plax writes, "The artist pushes this ambiguity to the limits, just as participants did at actual fetes." Consequently, for Plax, Watteau's images are necessarily ambiguous because they reflect the tension between the external show of elite behavior and the lingering uncertainty that external appearances could be misleading. Like Vidal, Plax defines the ambiguity in Watteau's

images as a reflection of the artist's contemporary social context, and, like Vidal, she claims that Watteau is significant for his ability to capture the essence of that context in paint.

In an attempt to replace the nineteenth-century's myth of Watteau as a melancholy-ridden artistic genius, modern scholars have ventured into Watteau's hazy world of ambiguities and returned with a handful of new theories. Objecting to a dependence on the artist's biography that characterized previous interpretations, modern art historians tend to explain Watteau's images as inherently ambiguous due to the nature of the subject they portray. Though these scholars define Watteau's ambiguity in different terms, they all agree that the artist presented a definite, recognizable subject matter. They consistently clarify the ambiguity in order to show that this subject matter is serious, relevant, and anything but superficial. While the efforts of these art historians have immensely expanded our understanding of Watteau and his historical context, the need to justify the significance of Watteau by explaining his ambiguity is reminiscent of the ambitions of the Romantic writers. It seems that modern art historians, like their nineteenth-century counterparts, are uncomfortable leaving the ambiguity undefined, perhaps because it was Watteau's supposed lack of specificity that first earned him a negative reputation from his eighteenth-century critics. With the removal of the artist-as-genius myth in the late twentieth century, revisionist art historians lost the nineteenth-century's explanation for Watteau's ambiguity, and in doing so they left the question of his significance open to attack. By constantly searching to explain Watteau's ambiguity, however, modern art historians inadvertently project an image of Watteau as being only as good as his subject permits. Attaching his ambiguities to a specific, definite subject matter signifies a lack of confidence in the images' abilities to endure on their own; it seems to suggest that Watteau's initial critics were right, that his works are merely visual displays without real significance to French culture, that

we too, seduced by his surfaces, search for ways to justify our admiration of a superficial artist. What's more, pin-pointing one source for the ambiguity limits the way we approach his images, thereby limiting the type of pleasure we receive from them. To embrace the significance of Watteau, his elusive subject need not be defined, but, instead, his ambiguities should be celebrated for their ability to persistently resist every effort to contain them. This is what makes Watteau and his images timeless, this is what fascinated the Romantics and what mystifies modern scholars. Indefinable in subject and form, the ambiguities reveal not *what* has captured Watteau's audience but *how* the pleasures of Watteau are endless.