

Watteau, Antoine

Also known as

Watteau, Jean Antoine

French, 1684 - 1721

BIOGRAPHY

Jean Antoine Watteau came from a modest family in the Flemish city of Valenciennes, which had been annexed by France in 1678. He is said to have spent his formative years training under either the religious painter Jacques Albert Gérin (c. 1640–1702) or the sculptor Antoine Joseph Pater (1670–1747), the father of his only pupil, Jean-Baptiste Joseph Pater (French, 1695 - 1736). In 1702 Watteau arrived in Paris, first finding employment with a picture dealer on the Pont Notre-Dame specializing in the rote production of portraits and religious paintings. Around 1705 he entered the studio of Claude Gillot (French, 1673 - 1722), a draftsman, printmaker, and painter. Gillot was an influential, idiosyncratic master who transmitted to Watteau a degree of the satirical whimsy that characterized his own specialized depictions of theater and genre scenes, bacchanals, and decoration designs. Watteau also absorbed from Gillot the formal and technical elements that made up his own style: an energetic, assured draftsmanship, sinewy figures, and a penchant for expressive themes and characters. By 1708 Watteau entered the workshop of the ornamental painter Claude Audran III (French, 1658 - 1734), helping him create interior decoration for private and royal residences.

In 1709 Watteau received second prize in the yearly competition of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture for the Prix de Rome for his submission *Abigail Who Brings Food to David* (location unknown). Disenchanted by this setback and the conditions of his employment with Audran, Watteau returned to Valenciennes in 1710, having financed his trip home by selling a painting of a departure of troops (probably *Return from the Campaign*, location unknown) to the dealer Pierre Sirois for 60 livres. As a garrison town, Valenciennes likely provided inspiration for several more distinctive military scenes characterized by an attention to the quotidian aspects of camp life that Watteau made after his return to Paris. Watteau also applied his ineffable draftsmanship to printmaking, producing an album of fashion plate etchings, *Figures de modes*, from about 1709 to 1713. Such a production reflected Watteau's awareness of and reliance on the prevailing tastes of elite private clients, a class of patrons epitomized by Pierre Crozat (1665–1740),

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the immensely wealthy banker to the French monarch. Crozat soon became Watteau's most important and devoted patron. Watteau lived for a time in Crozat's Parisian *hôtel particulier*, where he not only painted a set of important decorations of the seasons, including *Ceres (Summer)*, but also made drawn copies after important Italian master paintings and drawings from Crozat's vast collection. Through Crozat, Watteau became intimately engaged with Venetian painting, a tradition much in vogue in France during the regency period.

In spite of a production largely outside the mainstream of academic art, Watteau remained within the orbit of the Académie. In 1712 he was approved (*agrégé*) by the Académie, owing to the favorable evaluation given to his picture *Les Jaloux*. This painting, known only through an engraving, depicted commedia dell'arte figures commingling in a forest clearing, a fusion of landscape and costumed characters that exemplified Watteau's hybrid pictorial style. The peculiarity of Watteau's productions in turn led the Académie to break long-established tradition by allowing the artist to choose the subject of his *morceau de réception*, the painting required for full admittance to the Académie. Five years elapsed before Watteau submitted as his reception piece, on August 28, 1717, the famous *Pèlerinage à Cythère (Pilgrimage to Cythera, Paris, Musée du Louvre)*. Though Watteau was received into the Académie as a full member—that is, as a history painter—the title of his reception piece was struck out in the Académie's minutes and replaced with the words “une feste galante.” After Watteau's death, the descriptor *fête galante* would come to describe an entirely new genre, one that Watteau is credited with pioneering and perfecting over the course of his short career. As depictions of elegant figures in park settings engaged in amorous interaction, *fêtes galantes* harnessed an array of artistic precedents and contemporary cultural tendencies: garden scenes with figures by earlier masters such as Sir Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577 - 1640), Venetian color, and the incipient libertinism of the regency period. Yet Watteau far exceeded the sum of this composite lineage, using indefinite locales and the suggestive psychology of his figures to imbue his *fêtes galantes* with poetic mystery.

Despite the success of *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, Watteau soon distanced himself from the Académie, finding his patrons among a small circle of private admirers rather than in the official world of the state and the church. It may have been to seek further commercial success that in 1720 Watteau traveled to London, where he hoped to find another audience for his talents. By this time he was suffering

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from what is believed to have been tuberculosis, and it is possible that he also intended to consult with the infectious disease specialist Dr. Richard Mead, for whom he painted several important pictures, including *The Italian Comedians*. On his return to Paris in 1721, Watteau resided for a time with the dealer Edme François Gersaint, painting the famous *Shop Sign* (Berlin, Charlottenburg Palace) for the latter's premises. Eventually moving out on his own to Nogent-sur-Marne, Watteau briefly renewed his friendship with his former student Jean-Baptiste Pater, whom he instructed during his last months of life. Watteau died at the age of thirty-seven in 1721.

This text was previously published in Philip Conisbee et al., *French Paintings of the Fifteenth through the Eighteenth Century*, The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue (Washington, DC, 2009), 465.


Original text by Benedict Leca. Revised by Aaron Wile.

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July 25, 2022

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To cite: Benedict Leca, “Antoine Watteau,” *French Paintings of the Fifteenth through Eighteenth Centuries*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/constituent/1967> (accessed May 17, 2024).