

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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## FIRST EXHIBITION OF WATTEAU PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS GOES ON VIEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D. C. (January 27, 1984) Watteau: 1684-1721 is the first exhibition solely devoted to the paintings and drawings of Jean-Antoine Watteau, the master who, in spite of a very brief career, is considered to be one of the greatest French artists of all time.

Marking the three-hundredth anniversary of the artist's birth, the exhibition goes on view in the National Gallery of Art's East Building from June 17 through September 23, 1984. The forty paintings and ninety drawings from European and American public and private collections explore the full range and evolution of Watteau's style, his choice of subject matter and to some extent, his working method and the relationship of his drawings to his paintings.

Three of Watteau's most important paintings will be seen in the United States for the first time: the Gilles (c. 1716-1718), from the Louvre; The Embarkation for Cythera (c. 1718), which has just been purchased from the Prince von Hohenzollern for the Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin; and Gersaint's Shopsign (c. 1720) also from Berlin.

The exhibition marks the first time a show will have been shared by Washington, Paris and Berlin. It represents a collaboration between the National Gallery of Art, the Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris, and the Verwaltung der Staatlichen Schlösser and Gärten, Berlin. Pierre Rosenberg, Conservateur en chef

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au Département des Peintures of the Louvre, and Margaret Morgan Grasselli, assistant curator in the National Gallery's Department of Prints and Drawings, have chosen the paintings and drawings respectively and have written the corresponding entries for the fully-illustrated catalogue. All of the paintings and some of the drawings will be reproduced in color.

Berlin's Embarkation for Cythera (1718) is considered to be the epitome of the dreamlike poetry based on themes of love that Watteau brought to an exquisite pitch never equalled before or since. A "fête galante," the genre most associated with Watteau's name, it portrays elegantly dressed courting couples placed in an idyllic setting. Modern scholarship believes the true subject is, in fact, a disembarkation, and that the figures are shown on Cythera, the island home of Venus, the Goddess of Love.

The two other major paintings in the exhibition are very large in comparison to the majority of relatively small numbers of Watteau paintings. The explanation is that they were both originally made as shoppings. The Gilles, now thought to portray Pierrot (both were theatrical characters who wore the same distinctive white costume), may have hung in a café owned by an actor. The painting is one of Watteau's most enigmatic and disturbing works because of the stark presentation of Pierrot, nearly life-size and dressed entirely in white.

Gersaint's Shoppingsign can be dated from biographical information to the time shortly after Watteau's year-long visit to England (1719-1720), less than a year before he died. Painted when he was extremely ill for his friend, the dealer Edme Gersaint, it is a fictional representation of the shop. Groups of well-dressed customers admire masterpieces and objets d'art. Clocks, mirrors, and a painting of Louis XIV that is being packed away may symbolize the passage of time, the shortness of life and were perhaps prompted by forebodings of his own death. Two major paintings from the National Gallery's permanent collection,

The Italian Comedians (c. 1720) and Ceres (c. 1715-1716), the only surviving painting from Watteau's most important commission, the Four Seasons, made for his friend and patron, Pierre Crozat, are included as well.

Other key works are Pleasures of the Dance, (c. 1716, Dulwich College, London), The Dance (c. 1719, Berlin) and Mezzetin (c. 1719, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). They exemplify the dance and music themes that are prevalent in Watteau's paintings. Military subjects, wall decorations, portraits and landscapes round out the variety of subjects Watteau painted.

Watteau is also generally regarded as one of the greatest French draftsmen of all time. Unlike his contemporaries, Watteau rarely executed formal compositional studies in preparation for his paintings. Instead he tended to make sketches --- often of his friends dressed in exotic or theatrical costumes --- without a specific painting in mind. When he needed figures for a painting, he turned to the bound volumes in which he kept his drawings and selected figures which appealed to him at the moment. Only occasionally did he make compositional studies. The Bower (c. 1715) from the National Gallery's collection, is one of the most complete and is one of the finest examples of his work as a designer.

The exhibition includes drawings from all phases of Watteau's career: figure studies, details of heads and hands, children, portraits, landscapes and copies after other masters. Particularly well represented are the drawings of his maturity, the last seven years of his life. Many of Watteau's drawings were never used in his paintings; however, a substantial number of drawings on view are connected with paintings in the exhibition. For example, there are five drawings for the National Gallery's Italian Comedians (c. 1720).

Among the magnificent drawings of women is Four Studies of a Woman's Head (c. 1716, private collection, France) drawn in trois-crayons, the mixture of red, white and black chalks typical of the drawings Watteau made. Watteau never

sketched in pen and ink. Nude Woman Half-Length (c. 1716-1717, Louvre) is equally graceful. The model's raised arm, partially obscuring her face but revealing her nude torso, creates a particularly sensuous effect using only red and black chalks. Two Women Seated on the Ground (c. 1716-17, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) in red chalk alone is a fine example of his full-length figures.

Watteau also made many powerful drawings of men, including the elegant Standing Man (c.1714, Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam) and the imposing Half-Length Portrait of a Persian (Teylers Museum, Haarlem). The latter can be dated to 1715 because a delegation from Persia was in Paris in that year. The Bearded Savoyard (c. 1715, Art Institute of Chicago), by contrast, shows his sympathetic interest in more ordinary people. The military genre that Watteau depicted from his earliest years is represented by several studies, including Three Marching Soldiers (c. 1715, Berlin).

After its premiere at the National Gallery of Art, the exhibition will travel to the Grand Palais, Paris (October 25, 1984 - January 25, 1985) and to the Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany (February 22, 1985 - May 26, 1985). Owing to the delicate nature of works of art on paper and to travel restrictions on some of the paintings, the exhibition at the three institutions will include a number of different works. Each showing will present a balanced view of Watteau's oeuvre. The catalogue will include discussions and reproductions of all of the works shown in all three cities.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Public Information), or Carolyn Amiot, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565 (202)842-6353.