

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Press Preview:

Tuesday, June 12, 1984

10 a.m. - 3 p.m.

WATTEAU PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS
GOES ON VIEW AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D. C. May 21, 1984. Watteau: 1684-1721 is the first exhibition solely devoted to the paintings and drawings of Jean-Antoine Watteau, the French master, who inspite of a very brief career, is considered to be one of the greatest artists of all time.

The exhibition goes on view in the National Gallery of Art's West Building from June 17 through September 16, 1984 and is the first attempt to exhibit Watteau's works in chronological order. Because the artists did not date any of his works, the chronology has been determined by relating drawings to datable paintings, events, military camps and marches and through identification of models.

The forty-four paintings and ninety-eight drawings show the full range and evolution of Watteau's drawing style, his choice of subject matter and to some extent, 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: Gilles, Embarkation for Cythera and Gersaint's Shopsign, the largest of Watteau's paintings and the last of his great works. Two major paintings from the National Gallery's permanent collection, Italian

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Comedians and Ceres, the only surviving painting from the series, Four Seasons, are included as well.

The exhibition marks the first collaboration between the National Gallery, Reunion des musees nationaux, Paris, and Verwaltung der Staatlichen Schlosser und Garten, Berlin. Pierre Rosenberg, Conservateur en chef au Departement des Peintures, Musee 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 written a corresponding essay. Ms. Grasselli has also written the introduction to the catalogue.

Embarkation for Cythera (c.), is considered to be the epitome of "fete galant," the portrayal of everyday people placed in an idyllic, dream like setting. The composition is comprised of small groups of people and is the theme is thought to symbolize the various stages of courting. Watteau rarely executed formal compositional studies in preparation for a painting. Instead, Watteau frequently made sketches --- often of his friends --- for his own personal entertainment. These sketches, made in bound volumes, were later selected for specific paintings. Often figure groups appear to be repeated and in some cases, certain models can be identified. The gracefully drawn figures and rich colors are reminiscent of Rubens whose influence is felt throughout Watteau's career. The realistic portrayal of nature in the background landscape reflects a Venetian influence as well.

Another work included in the exhibition is Pleasures of the Dance, (Dulwich College, London), an example of the dance and music themes which are prevalent in Watteau's paintings.

Two other major paintings were made as signs: One such work, Gilles, is thought to portray Pierrot (a figure in Italian comedy) who owned a cafe

where the sign may have been displayed. The painting is one of Watteau's most enigmatic and disturbing works. A central figure dressed in white, dominates the canvas. A group of sinister, mocking figures appear to be off stage in the background.

Gersaint's Shopsign can be dated from biological information about Watteau. It was executed after Watteau's return to England in 1720, a year before he died. It is a fictional representation of a shop in which clusters of elegantly dressed people admire masterpieces painted in miniature scale. A clock, a mirror and a painting which is being crated away are possibly symbols of the passage of time and fading beauty.

The last nine years of Watteau's life are considered to be his mature years as a draftsman. One of the magnificent drawings on view is Four Studies of a Woman's Head, drawn in trois crayons, the use of red, white and black chalk, is typical of the drawings Watteau made and kept for later use. Watteau never sketched in pen and ink. Nude Woman Half Length is equally graceful, drawn in red and black chalks. The model's raised arm partially obscures her face thereby creating a sensuous effect. The convincing handling of light on her flesh is accomplished not in the typical fashion by using white chalk to highlight, but rather allowing the white paper on which the drawing is made to create the effect.

Military genre is a subject which Watteau turned to from the early years throughout his career. Study of Three Soldiers drawn during his mature years exemplifies the artist's firmness of line, sense of rhythm, and attention to detail in portraying uniforms and weapons.

The Bower, from the National Gallery's collection, is one of Watteau's largest extant drawings and is one of the very few complete compositional sketches.

After its premiere at the National Gallery of Art, the exhibition will travel to the Grand Palais, Paris (October 1984 - January 1985) and to the Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany (February 1985 - May 1985.) Due 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 different works. Each exhibition will present a balanced view of Watteau's oeuvre and the catalogue will contain reproductions of the works on view in Washington, Paris and Berlin.

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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.

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