



ANTOINE WATTEAU, *Return from Cythera*, 1717, Louvre, Paris, France

Bibliography

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Schneider, Pierre *The World of Watteau, 1684-1721*. New York: Time Incorporated. 1967.

Known by the names *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, *Une Feste Galante*, and *Return from Cythera*, Antoine Watteau's 1717 rococo painting of lovers traveling through the wilderness, surrounded by cupids while a bust of Venus looks on, has stirred up mixed emotions and interpretations from those who view it. This oil on canvas work has been seen as shrouded in mystery, a consequence of Watteau's lack of narrative in his painting. Others have argued the exact opposite, believing *Return from Cythera* is undoubtedly a narrative piece which comments on the aristocratic society. There are also those who have interpreted it as symbolic for the lavishness of the early eighteenth century Parisian opera-ballet. While each point of view sheds light on a different aspect of *Return from Cythera*, each interpretation can be attributed to the subtlety and implicit nature of the subject of Watteau's work.

Point of View

In Pierre Schneider's *The World of Watteau, 1684-1781*, Schneider focuses on the mystery of Watteau's *Return from Cythera* (referred to in text as *Pilgrimage to Cythera*), a picture which, instead of being a narrative "represents a scene from a play".¹ Schneider argues that it is because of this lack of communication in Watteau's painting that the work once interpreted as lovers on their way to Cythera, after over 200 years has formed a new interpretation of lovers leaving Cythera.² Schneider himself does not state his opinion one way or another regarding whether the subjects of the painting are on a pilgrimage to, or returning from

1. Pierre Schneider, *The World of Watteau, 1684-1721*, (New York: Time Incorporated, 1967) 80

2. Schneider, 80

Cythera, but focuses more on Watteau's attempt to capture the "Golden Moment"³ rather than tell a story.

Schneider also speaks to the subtleties of Watteau's art, where although the idea of love is conveyed through the composition of the painting as well as through the subject of Cythera, an island synonymous with Venus, the Goddess of Love, it is not an explicit display of romance.⁴ Watteau neglects to paint lovers "kissing and clasping,"⁵ and while the "gentle interchanges between [the] courtly ladies and gentlemen" make the purpose of the painting clear, their actions are demure and give off a mood which can be more readily described as "wistful"⁶ instead of passionate or sexual. Overall, Schneider's point of view on *Return to Cythera* is one that interprets Watteau's lack of dynamic movement to signify an absence of narrative which consequently shrouds his painting in mystery.

Sarah R. Cohen, in the article "*Un Bal continuel: Watteau's Cythera Paintings and Aristocratic Dancing in the 1710s*" sees Watteau's painting as having the possibility of being read as a "definitive narrative"⁷ although she herself motions to "set aside attempts to 'read' the action as either a narrative or counter-narrative".⁸

Cohen instead focuses on the composition of the men and women in the scene and interprets the figures' stances not as poses, but as fluid, dancelike movements; both alluding to

3. Schneider, 79.

4. Schneider, 80.

5. Schneider, 80.

6. Schneider, 106.

7. Sarah R. Cohen, "Un Bal continuel: Watteau's Cythera Paintings and Aristocratic Dancing in the 1710s," *Art History* 17 (1994) 160

8. Cohen, 162.

and encouraging “aristocratic strategies of self identification” through dance.⁹ She states that their movements and gestures, while subtle, are “distinctly aristocratic” in the way they are composed and intermingling with one another.¹⁰ This type of composition and movement are similar to dance in that they are “‘useless movements.’”¹¹ It is because of this application of ‘useless movement’ that Cohen suggests that the collective expression of flirtation by the figures creates a story in itself, taking the place of a more literal narrative.¹² Cohen’s perspective is one of depth and takes into account the socioeconomic situation of early eighteenth century French aristocracy. Unlike Schneider, Cohen suggests *Return from Cythera* contains meaning beyond the moment captured in the painting.

A similar sentiment is shared by Georgia Cowart, writer of the article, “Watteau’s *Pilgrimage to Cythera* and the Subversive Utopia of the Opera-Ballet”; the only difference being Cowart chooses to focus on a different aspect of the French aristocracy. Cowart makes no mention of her view on Watteau’s intentions to create either a narrative or a scene, but instead focuses on the idea of the mythical utopian island of Cythera being utilized as a parallel to the “lighthearted and colorful” opera-ballet.¹³

Cowart delves also into Watteau’s life to further explain why he would choose to create a work of art centered around a peaceful utopia such as Cythera. “Watteau grew up in Valenciennes, a town...ruthlessly conquered by Louis XIV...the artist would have seen firsthand

9. Cohen, 162.

10. Cohen, 160.

11. Cohen, 163.

12. Cohen, 164.

13. Georgia Cowart, “Watteau’s *Pilgrimage to Cythera* and the Subversive Utopia of the Opera-Ballet,” *Art Bulletin* 83 (2001) 461.

the horrors of war during the worst winter ever recorded...His close friend Antoine de La Roque lost a leg at... one of the war's worst battles."¹⁴ After experiencing such an ordeal, it is only fitting that Watteau would want to make his sentiments against the patriarchal militarism of Louis XIV known, hence his focus on harmony in the form of Cythera as well as his incorporation of the bust of Venus, a symbol of love and matriarchy.¹⁵

Comparative Summary

Soft and intimate, romantic and elegant, Antoine Watteau's *Return from Cythera* embodies the classic mode of eighteenth century Rococo. The lovers depicted in the painting can be seen as leaving for, or going to Cythera depending on the personal opinion of the viewer. Whether the painting is telling its own story, or capturing a scene from a separate narrative is also open to interpretation. It seems that when observing Watteau's piece, the only undisputed element of his art is the frivolity of his signature *fête galante* style.

Through reading each author's point of view on Watteau's *Return from Cythera*, it can easily be said that Watteau's style of composition leaves much to the imagination of the viewer. There seems to be no definitive answer on whether or not *Return from Cythera* was meant to be a narrative or a scene, however it is true that there is a lack of action within the painting. The area of interpretation most widely accepted seems to be in the symbolism of *Return from Cythera*. Whether through the dancelike movements of the figures,¹⁶ or the use of Cythera as a symbol for the utopian opera-ballet,¹⁷ the general consensus is that *Return from Cythera* is a painting

14. Cowart, 468.

15. Cowart, 468.

16. Cohen, 160.

17. Cowart, 461.

focused on the activities of the aristocratic society. This is not surprising, as Watteau is known for creating the painting style, *fête galante*, which focused on and celebrated the idle, lavish lives of the aristocracy.