ANTOINE WATTEAU

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The 'Pilgrimage to Cythera'

The known facts about the *Pilgrimage to Cythera* (fig. 147; colourplate 39) are few and quickly passed in review.[109] On 30 July 1712 Watteau was accepted as a candidate for membership in the Académie Royale. Unusually, he was allowed to choose the subject for the required reception-piece. Two academicians, Antoine Coypel and François Barrois, were assigned to watch him paint it in a room in the Louvre. This was customary procedure designed to make sure that the candidate received no help in producing the work. Ordinarily, the candidate was expected to present a sketch for approval before undertaking the final painting, but as we shall see there is reason to believe that Watteau never made one. It is not known when he actually decided on the subject or when he began painting it. The Académie repeatedly protested his tardiness in completing the work, and finally, on 9 January 1717, Watteau was informed that he had to produce it within six months. Possibly only then did he begin to work on it in earnest. The broad, rather sketchy brushwork of the *Pilgrimage* suggests rapid execution. Eight months later, on 28 August 1717, he presented the picture, which became the Académie's property, and his reception as an academician was approved. The Académie's secretary first noted in the official record that Watteau's painting represents '*Le Pèlerinage à l'isle de Cithère*', but he then crossed out the title and inserted the words, '*une feste galante*'.

Two or three years later Watteau made a second version of the painting, the same size, but brighter and sharper in colour and handling, and with additions and changes in figures and composition (fig. 155; colouplate 42). This picture was probably commissioned by Jean de Jullienne, who owned it when it, rather than the first version, was engraved for Jullienne's corpus of prints after Watteau's paintings. The print bears the title *L'Embarquement pour Cythère*.

In 1795 the Académie version entered the Louvre, where until 1869 (the year of the great La Caze donation) it was the only painting by Watteau the museum owned. Its reputation grew enormously in the course of the nineteenth century, and it finally became, in the Goncourts' appreciation of Watteau, 'the masterpiece of French masterpieces', and 'the marvel of the Master's miracles.'[110] Its stature has hardly diminished since then, and its identification as Watteau's quintessential *fête galante* has remained unquestioned, so that the meaning and mood one discerns in it have naturally been taken to underlie the whole body of his *fêtes galantes*.

Throughout the eighteenth century and for much of the next century, the *Pilgrimage to Cythera* seems to have been regarded simply as a depiction of a happy journey to a symbolic island of love. In 1854 the respected art historian Charles Blanc still referred to it as '*le gai pèlerinage*'.[111] But by then the picture was already being viewed through the melancholic atmosphere of a new romantic sensibility. The idea of love had taken on a tragic air, and the dream of 'Cythera' had become a symbol of modern disillusionment. Gérard de Nerval looked for Watteau's bucolic lovers on Venus' island, but he saw only a dead terrain on which a three-branched gibbet rose.[112] Small wonder that in the gallery of the Louvre, from an appreciation of the sunlight that Watteau shed on 'the sorrowful Cythera', one went on to imagine 'Watteau's infinite saddness in the *Embarkation to Cythera*'; and more,

Figure 146 (above)
François Boucher, *Spring*
New York, The Frick Collection

Figure 147 (below)
Watteau, *Pilgrimage to Cythera*
129 × 193 cm
Paris, Louvre (Giraudon)

one thought one could divine 'the bitterness of life beneath the elegant composure' of Watteau's shepherds and shepherdesses.[113]

The idea that Watteau's *Cythera* is 'crowned by melancholy' took on the status of a truth attained. Although it was the product of poetic subjectivity rather than art-historical analysis,[114] it has seemed to many spectators justified by the 'music' of the painting's composition and colouring. The sinuous arabesque, described by the ground and the figures, that 'expires' as it falls to the left, the slow rhythm of movement and the autumnal colours create, a modern critic writes, 'a symphony of nostalgia.'[115] But imagined music exists only in the ear of the beholder, and it can have no objective critical value. Slow movements can fill the heart with gladness, and the arabesque may be heard differently, like the rise of a melodious wave ending in the lively arpeggio of a spray of *amorini*. Furthermore, discoloured varnish has deepened the golden tones of the picture, probably veiling its cooler sounds and hushing its internal gaiety.

The assumption that melancholy sentiment stands at the centre of the *Pilgrimage to Cythera* is, however, deeply rooted, and its explication has been the goal, and its affirmation the supposed proof, of two of the most influential modern interpretations of the picture. Charles de Tolnay believed the painting was learnedly programmed to represent the cosmic cycle of love. The couples move from the statue of Venus through stages of persuasion, consent and harmony, to enter the ship of Love in quest of Cythera, fulfilment. But the season is autumn and the time is twilight, and the goal is lost in the distant mists. In Tolnay's view, Watteau's message is that in this transitory realm of earthly existence love is ephemeral, fated to pass like life itself. Another author has taken this reading a step farther and associated the procession of gallant couples with the 'dance of death'.[116]

In an interpretation that proposes a radical revision in our understanding of the action in Watteau's painting, Michael Levey argued that the lovers are not setting out for Cythera, but about to return home from their pilgrimage. This would explain why no distinct island is visible in the distance, and it seems confirmed by the Venus term, which should logically denote the place sacred to the goddess. Furthermore, the term is garlanded with roses, suggesting a rite accomplished; indeed, the lovers have paired off, that is, accomplished the purpose of their pilgrimage. 'This,' Levey argues, 'is the reason why an air of transience and sadness has so often been detected in the [picture]'. 'There is even a hint ... that one cannot leave the island "*sans cesser de s'aimer*".'[117]

It may be argued that the fact that in the eighteenth century the image was almost always interpreted as an embarkation for Cythera, apparently by Jullienne among others, is strong evidence against Levey's thesis,[118] but some of his critics (Hermann Bauer with particular acuity) have insisted that 'going or coming' is in any event irrelevant for understanding the picture.[119] I must concur, and I believe the fundamental issue concerns our perception of the painting's mood. For if it is not wrapped in melancholy, the picture's essential meaning, its philosophy so to speak, can accommodate the observations of either Tolnay or Levey, but it will not admit their conclusions.

Discussions of the *Pilgrimage to Cythera* usually proceed by analysis of the finished work. It

may be useful, however, to come at the painting from another direction, by attempting to reconstruct the way in which it was created and the artist's thoughts as he went about it. Admittedly, this involves speculation, but we are not without reasonable grounds for it. Of course, we cannot know what Watteau was thinking when he left the Académie on the day he was *agrée*, but we do know what his options were as he confronted the problem of painting a reception-piece, and we can make informed guesses about his thoughts on the basis of the biographical and visual evidence we have.

It appears certain that Watteau put the problem out of his mind for a time. After 1712 he was increasingly busy meeting the demand for his work, and what leisure he could afford was for a while used in intensive study of paintings and drawings in the collections of Crozat and others, to which he now gained easy access. Probably he forgot about the reception-piece until reminders from the Académie began coming. By then he was even busier. Furthermore (as I noted in Chapter 3), membership in the Académie did not promise Watteau much in practical or financial terms, and, the greater his private success, the less motivation he had for devoting time and energy to producing the reception-piece. Academic status can only have served to gratify Watteau's ego.

It seems to me especially important to recognize pride as the artist's main motivation for producing his reception-piece, because it puts the matter of the painting's subject in a special light. Logically, as a matter of pride, one would have expected him to have made a claim to the highest academic rank by submitting a history painting as his reception-piece. This may, in fact, have been his intention for a time during his close association with La Fosse, when he made some history pictures in landscape settings, like *Le Triomphe de Cérès* (fig. 62). It is even possible that his drawing of the *Finding of Moses* (fig. 59) represents an idea for his reception-piece.[120]

By around 1715–16, as the reputation of the special genre Watteau had developed became widely established, it became clear that for him traditional history painting was less original as well as less marketable than modern pastorales. Any ambitions he harboured to become a history painter were now abandoned. It is not accidental that his long-standing desire to see Italy suddenly vanished. In the years when he could afford to travel he went to London rather than to Rome or Venice. Watteau had discovered the full power and the territory of his artistic genius, and he surely took enormous pride in it. In choosing a subject for his reception-piece he must have been determined to affirm the originality of *his* genre, and to present it in a way that would show it belonged to the highest academic category.

With such an aim the subject he sought would have to show the gallant society his work normally pictured and, while it could not be history in any traditional sense, it would have to evoke ideas and an atmosphere consonant with the historical genre. It seems to me that one thing Watteau would not have considered, because it would compromise his assertion of the inventiveness of his vision, was producing a version of some masterwork of the past. It is true that in the grouping of figures and in some details the *Pilgrimage to Cythera* shows striking similarities to Rubens' *Garden of Love* (fig. 148), a composition he surely knew well. But if Rubens' picture helped him to formulate his own, it was not his primary

Figure 148 (above)
PETER PAUL RUBENS
The Garden of Love
Madrid, Prado

Figure 149 (left)
WATTEAU, *L'Ile de Cythère*
(The Island of Cythera)
43.1 × 53.3 cm
Frankfurt, Städelsches
Kunstinstitut

inspiration.[121] In fact, it would not have served Watteau's purpose, for at the time the *Garden of Love* can hardly have been accorded a status equal to a history painting. It was then called *La Conversation*, and, despite the statue and cupids, it was certainly viewed as a genre scene, a grandiose depiction of 'a modish group of people in fashionable social interaction.'[122]

There is no way of knowing exactly how Watteau lighted on the subject for his reception-piece, but it was so common in the literature and theatre of his time that he did not have to search for it. Just in the years when he was trying to decide on a subject, between 1713 and 1716, a pilgrimage to Cythera was shown or mentioned at least five times on the theatrical stage in Paris.[123] The subject allowed for a modern company of gallant pilgrims on the terrain of the mythological past. Universal and generalizing in its statement, it was modern and historical, and, what was probably decisive for Watteau, it was virtually unknown in the history of art. He was the first great master ever to picture it.

Watteau had, of course, himself painted the subject earlier, in his *L'Ile de Cythère* (fig. 149; colourplate 6), but that was a mere theatre illustration, entirely lacking what may be called the historicizing ambitions of his masterpiece. Still, Watteau looked back to it, and his composition, with its massing of trees and figures on the right side, and a view of a boat, sky and open sea at the left, is plainly dependent on it.

In addition to his own *L'Ile de Cythère*, the theme of a pilgrimage to Love's island appeared in art before him only in some quite modest works.[124] One of them, an engraving by Claude Duflos, possibly after Picart (fig. 150), has often been mentioned in connection with Watteau's picture, but its importance perhaps needs to be stressed. The evidence is strong that it dates from around 1708, if not before. It seems certain, too, because of Watteau's involvement with the print trade, that he knew Duflos and his work. The engraved scene takes place on the island of Cythera. In the right background a boat, ferried by a cupid, has just arrived with a pair of lovers. Behind them is the temple of Venus. In the foreground are four couples whose arrangement has no particular plan and whose actions have no narrative or dramatic implications. But this rather awkward picture of amorous dalliance on Cythera apparently stimulated Watteau's thinking. The two nearest couples in the print, the man helping a woman to rise and the man on his knees before a woman with a fan, became two of the three major figural images in Watteau's painting. In addition, the towering mountains he showed across the water were anticipated in the print.

We can assume that Watteau went about painting the *Pilgrimage to Cythera* in the same way that he did his other pictures. He may have begun painting right off, or he may first have made a summary compositional drawing, like the one that served him for *Plaisirs d'amour* (fig. 135). In any event he surely started with a conception of the landscape composition. This was drawn from *L'Ile de Cythère*, only given a new spatial grandeur and a swelling rhythm. The next stage was to assemble figures that would harmonize with the landscape. A first decision must have been to adapt the couple seen from behind in *L'Ile de Cythère* to provide a strong vertical accent in the middle of the picture and at the height of the wave-like arabesque that defines the hill. Like its counterpart in the earlier work, this couple serves to link the two halves of the composition, as the woman looks to the right

and the man points to the left. Here it is far more artfully designed to take the familiar form of the pair of lovers who, in many of Watteau's paintings, look back as they turn away to walk arm-in-arm together (cf. figs. 2, 134). The arrangement and placement of this couple was critical in the evolution of the picture, for it established the direction of compositional movement and dictated the formal and psychological shape of the figures relating to it.

Two couples in Duflos' print struck Watteau's fancy as types that could be meaningfully combined. They needed to be redesigned, however. In a powerful drawing for the central couple Watteau confronted the problem of making a coherent unit of the two figures in movement (colourplate 40).[125] The seated couple at the right was composed of figures found in his sketchbooks. The woman was taken, virtually unchanged, from one of three unrelated figures on a sheet of studies.[126] The gallant kneeling beside her came from a drawing made years earlier (fig. 151) in connection with *L'Ile de Cythère*, which incorporated the standing pilgrim in the drawing. These two figures combined so felicitously that Watteau used the couple as the main subject of a now lost painting, *Bon voyage* (fig. 152).[127]

The three pairs of figures were brought together in a sequence of movement that rises, emotionally as well as compositionally, from the seated couple, where the man whispers words of love to a demure woman, to the couple where the man lifts the object of his desire, to the two lovers at the crest of the hill (colourplate 41). Considered alone, this figural vignette might by itself be the centre of a *fête galante*. In form and content it does not differ substantially from the grouping of people in *L'Amour paisible* (fig. 2), for example. But there the lovers enjoy a patch of countryside somewhere. Here they move within the context of a dream of an enchanted isle.

Watteau had made the decision, following the example of his own earlier picture, to show the figures wearing the short capes and carrying the staffs and other accessories of pilgrims. This was not strictly necessary. Duflos' pilgrims wear the fashionable clothes of their time. But the costuming moves the vison on to an ideal, timeless plane of existence. Furthermore, if the behaviour of the couples, mainly derived from Duflos' print, is appropritate to dalliance on Venus' island, pilgrims' dress tends to emphasize the idea of Cythera as the goal of a 'journey'.

After the main figures had been defined and placed, Watteau would probably have had a still undefined, or only vaguely defined, design to the right and left of the group. Duflos' print shows a temple in the right background, but the dense foliage that would already have filled Watteau's painting precluded a view of architecture. Watteau opted for a term, instead of a temple, of Venus. But that Duflos' image was before him when he made the decision seems very probable, and, in fact, the bow and quiver and garland of flowers with which he dressed the term appear as prominent features on the tree at the left in the print. This dependence on Duflos, along with the absence of any statuary in Watteau's *L'Ile de Cythère*, where a voyage *to* the island is clearly meant, and the fact that terms traditionally mark boundaries, property lines, strongly suggests that the locale on the right side of Watteau's painting is Cythera.

The left side of the picture, where Watteau, following the composition of *L'Ile de*

Figure 150
CLAUDE DUFLOS
The Island of Cythera
Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale

Figure 151 (above)
WATTEAU
Studies of Gallant Pilgrims
Sanguine, 15.5 × 21 cm
Dresden, Kupferstichkabinett

Figure 152 (right)
Bon Voyage
Engraving after Watteau
Original, 18.3 × 22.5 cm
London, Trustees of the
British Museum

Figure 153 (above)
WATTEAU, *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, detail
Paris, Louvre (Giraudon)

Figure 154 (left)
WATTEAU, counterproof of figures in the *Pilgrimage to Cythera*
Oil on paper, 28.7 × 21.1 cm
Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland

Cythère, had painted water and distant mountains, inevitably ended with a boat. The compositional movement of the three main couples and the descent of the hill necessarily meant that any figures in this area had to go to, rather than from, the boat. Two couples are about to board it. Three others, approaching it, are rustic types; Cytherean pleasure are for all, country boys and girls as well as urbane ladies and gentlemen. These figures make an image of mutual affection as they hug each other closely (fig. 153). If they are leaving Cythera it is with no regrets, and around the boat they are about to board, decorated and canopied like a wedding bed, cupids revel in a dizzying flight of celebration.

But are these pilgrims in fact leaving Cythera? Considering only the left side of the picture, there is nothing about the boat, boarding party or the landscape to contradict the opposite, more expected reading that they are setting out for the island. One must stress the beholder's normal assumptions, for a while a voyage to Cythera was a familiar conceit, and gallant pilgrims and a boat would immediately call it to mind, a return from Cythera had no established iconography in literature or art.[128] If Watteau had intended to change the meaning of the image so drastically, surely he would have defined it more clearly. Just an indication of a city or village on the other side of the water would have sufficed to clarify the boat's destination.[129] It is telling too that on the horizon he showed great mountains enveloped by mists. Hardly suggestive of Paris or some other mundane place, the mountainous landscape belongs, as is shown by Watteau's earlier painting and by Duflos' print, to the constellation of poetic images that refer to the outward-bound voyage, for it evokes a wonderous, exotic land of dreams.[130]

It appears that there is a basic narrative inconsistency in Watteau's painting, and it evidently arose because the artist did not proceed systematically according to a predetermined iconographic plan. He was creating a *fête galante* of a higher order, but he worked, as usual, intuitively, while he drew on two essentially incompatible images of the journey to Cythera. The resultant picture does not bear analysis as a story or as a logical allegorical construction. But its meaning has always been radiantly clear. The *Pilgrimage to Cythera* is a vision of the power of the amorous instincts, of the urgent search for partners and of the intoxicating dream of Love fulfilled. Cythera exists in the human heart; thus it is here beneath the trees and also there, an everpresent distant goal, on the horizon.[131]

When Watteau submitted the painting to the Académie it was recognized as a pilgrimage to or on Cythera,[132] and duly recorded as such. But second thoughts about it led to a change in its registration. An issue that must have come up immediately was its classification in the hierarchy of the genres. The implication of the title of the picture, appearing as the first entry in the record, is that it is a kind of mythological subject. As such its acceptance by the Académie would have given Watteau the rank of history painter. Certainly some people must have objected that the subject was not a proper history, for it has no source in ancient literature and was not an established theme in the genre of history painting. Probably this objection was met with the argument that it was a modern allegory of love based on a mythological reference, and I imagine that this would have settled the matter but for the question of interpreting the picture. The academicians were as given as modern art historians to the analysis of narrative logic and symbolic meanings, and they

must have been troubled by the same ambiguities and inconsistencies that have caused so much debate in our time. They can only have concluded that Watteau's submission was questionable as a history painting, and, worse, faulty in its conceptual realization.[133] Combined, these two observations made them decide to cancel the title and to substitute the words, '*une feste galante*'. In doing this the academicians acknowledged that Watteau's was a special, novel, kind of modern genre; but their main intent was to deny Watteau the rank and privileges of a history painter. One cannot really blame them, for Watteau had disregarded their 'rules'. He was not, in fact, a history painter, and he had not intended to define his poem of love in terms that could be translated into a prose narrative.

Watteau must have been disappointed by the Académie's decision, but it did not really affect his career or the market for his work. In fact, it appears that very soon after he began painting his reception-piece, which would become quasi-public property, he was asked to replicate it for the private market. With a replica in mind he made counterproofs (reversed images produced by pressing a sheet of paper against the still wet surface of the canvas) of some of the figures in the picture (fig. 154). Watteau made counterproofs from other paintings too, and it is likely that it was a fairly regular part of his studio procedure to make such images. In the absence of detailed compositional sketches and drawings they served as a record of critical sections of his pictures, from which he could work later. Since they were only intermediate byproducts of the working process, neither first thoughts nor final statements, they were probably not highly prized as works of art, and consequently most have been lost to us. In a masterly analysis Martin Eidelberg has shown that Watteau must have made at least four, and maybe more, counterproofs from the Louvre painting, only two of which are known today.[134] That Watteau needed to make them strongly suggests that he did not produce the preliminary sketch the Académie ordinarily expected prior to submission of the reception-piece.

From the counterproofs and reference to the original painting, Watteau produced a new and rather different version of the *Pilgrimage to Cythera* (fig. 155; colourplate 42). The evidence of style indicates that two or three years went by before he actually painted the Berlin version of the picture. It is characterized by a brighter and higher key in colouring, a more complex and more three-dimensional handling of space and forms, a greater tension in the now lengthened and ornamented arabesque of its design, and a crisp sharpness of detail, all of which are closely paralleled in Watteau's late works. While the Louvre picture is dream-like with its vague, atmospheric definition of place and its sketchy treatment of forms, the Berlin painting conveys a sense of physical presence, and not merely because of its style. The later canvas is densely packed with figures. Twenty-four pilgrims instead of the original sixteen revel in the pleasures of a Cythera won and wished for. Where before twelve cupids were seen, all but one of them around the boat, now thirty-eight cupids fly riotously around and above the departing figures, climbing the mast and setting the sails of a seaworthy ship (colourplate 43). Eight more cupids invade the space beneath the trees, playing and urging lovers on.

The four pilgrim couples who have joined the company intensify the amorous

Figure 155 (above)
WATTEAU, *Pilgrimage to Cythera*
129 × 194 cm
Berlin, Charlottenburg Palace

Figure 156 (right)
WATTEAU, *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, detail
Berlin, Charlottenburg Palace

atmosphere and invest the scene with an outspoken sensuality. A man holds his partner around the waist as he lifts her into the ship of Love. Another couple, already on board, are cheek-to-cheek as they watch their companions (colourplate 43). At the right (fig. 156), by the great tree, a gallant offers roses to a woman who opens her apron to accept them. In the foreground a couple are seated on the ground, embracing as they look at each other passionately. Three cupids bind them with a garland of flowers. Above, a statue of Venus and Cupid, familiar from *Plaisirs d'amour* (colourplate 33), replaces the term of the Louvre painting. Venus' dominion, Love's triumph over all human ambitions, is symbolized by the lyre, books, arms and club – the attributes of the arts, learning and warfare – set beneath the statue. A cupid reaches down and pulls the laurel, symbol of glory, away from them and up to the foot of Venus.[135]

The Berlin version of the *Pilgrimage to Cythera* has always been viewed as gay and cheerful. It evokes the sensuousness of Rubens and, in fact, some of the flying cupids derive from pictures by the Flemish master.[136] Its earthy quality is so pronounced that one recent critic, Claude Ferraton, has even interpreted the action in the picture as symbolic of the act of love consummated. But while the imminent physical union of the lovers in the right foreground certainly seems implied, the other images, however amorous, are not so erotically charged. The statue, furthermore, as in *Plaisirs d'amour*, clarifies the action everywhere in the painting: passion rises and love strives for fulfilment.[137] The lovers have found each other on Cythera. They prepare to descend the hill and board the golden ship, its pink sail unfurled, its pink and white banner lifting to the breeze, to set out, towards the mountain rising blue on the horizon,[138] for the Cythera of dreams. A curious detail at the extreme left shows a cupid aiming the feathered end of an arrow at two lovers (colourplate 43). Should it strike them it would undo their love,[139] which may indeed be the fate of some pilgrims. But another cupid rushes to stop him. The mystery of love, its destiny tomorrow, is not to be known.

It has become customary to prefer the Louvre painting to its later revision. This is, I believe, only because the style of the former more readily allows one to read an expected melancholy sentiment into it, and melancholy is strangely regarded as more meaningful than joyousness. Watteau's reception-piece is a sublime masterpiece; but the later painting is sublimer still. Certainly, Watteau must have thought so. The Berlin picture is exquisitely painted, revealing not the least trace of the insouciant, hurried handling that faults some other late *fêtes galantes*. Watteau evidently turned to the task of making it with high interest and enthusiasm. He can only have conceived it as a work that would clarify and perfect his earlier statement. He knew what he was about, and it was he who dispelled what could be read as an air of wistfulness in the Louvre picture. Now, in his last years, possibly seriously ill already, he affirmed his most profound perception of life and love in a heady image that resounds with joy.

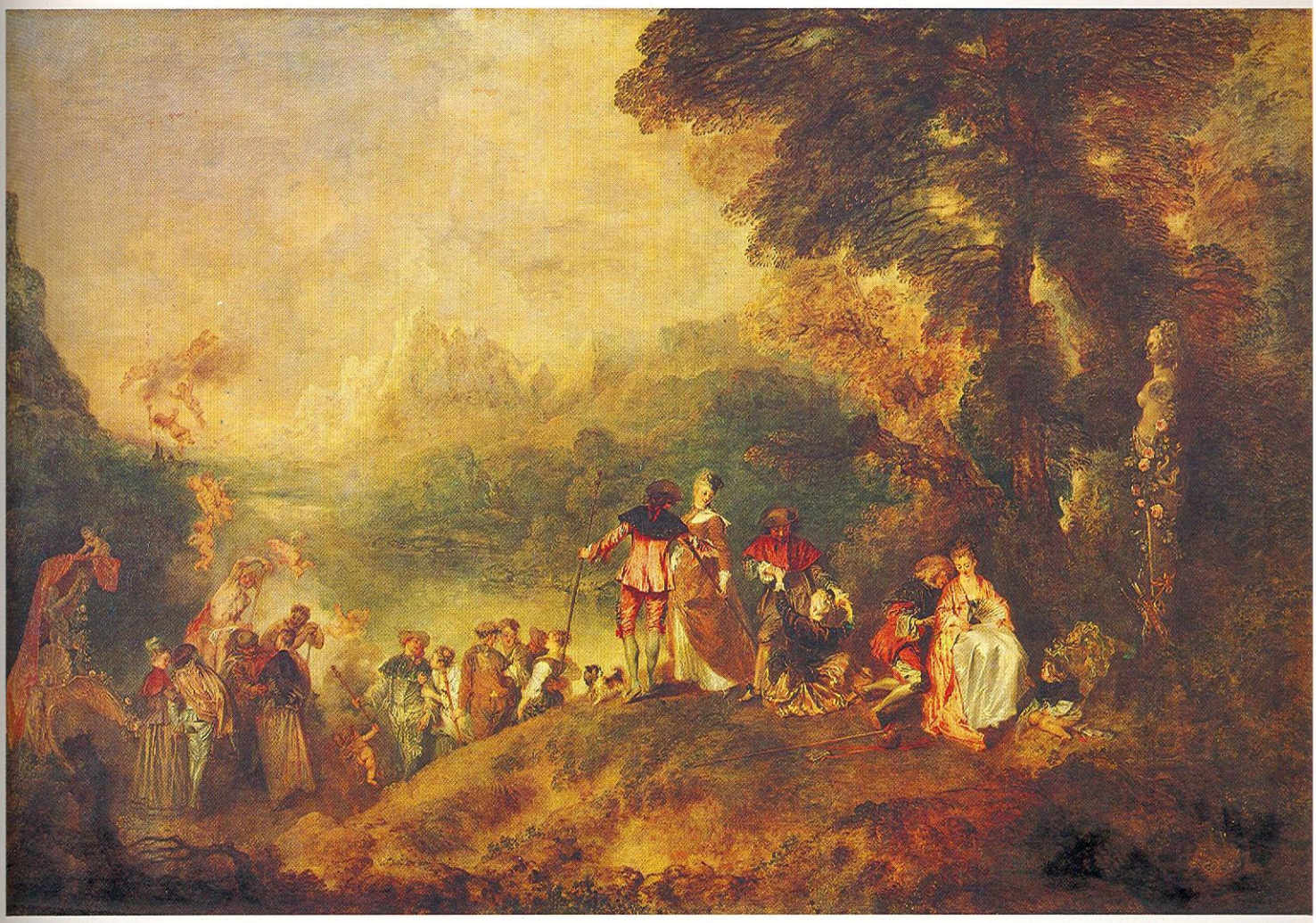

Plate 39
WATTEAU, *Pilgrimage to Cythera*
129 × 193 cm
Paris, Louvre (Cliché des Musées Nationaux)

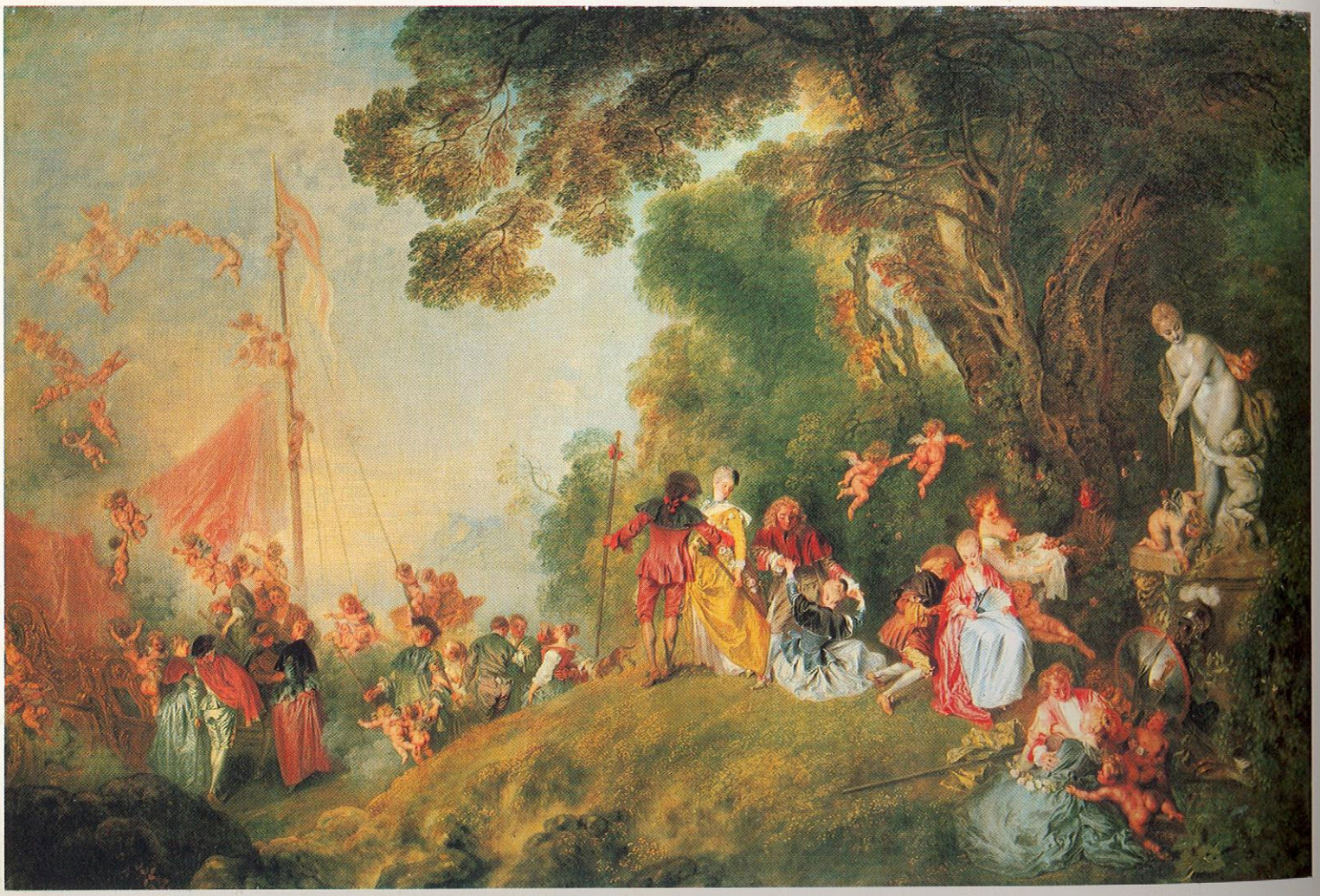

Plate 42 (above)
WATTEAU, *Pilgrimage to Cythera*
129 × 194 cm
Berlin, Charlottenburg Palace

Plate 43 (right)
WATTEAU, *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, detail
Berlin, Charlottenburg Palace