

Watteau's Vision of the *Commedia dell'Arte*

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Fig. 1
Attributed to Claude Gillot
Pierrot dancing, seen from the front
Musée du Louvre, Département
des arts Graphiques, Paris

Around 1702 Watteau (1684-1721) arrived in Paris from his native city of Valenciennes. In the capital circumstances favoured his rise to become the greatest painter of the French Rococo and one of the most original artists of the 18th century.

Watteau's first contacts with the world of the theatre and music date from the early years of his training in Paris, where he is documented around 1705 as a pupil of the painter, printmaker and set designer Claude Gillot (1673-1722). Few paintings by Gillot survive but there are numerous drawings and prints by him in museums around the world, including the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Musée du Louvre has a large group of works on paper by Gillot on theatrical themes, particularly the *Commedia dell'Arte* (fig. 1), a subject that would soon influence his pupil and which Watteau would subsequently develop with great skill to the point of surpassing his master.

Watteau continued his training with Claude Audran (1658-1734), a French painter who specialised in the decoration of interiors and ornament design. In 1704 Audran was appointed concierge to the Luxembourg Palace, which meant that Watteau could visit the collection housed in the palace and in particular study the works by Rubens including his celebrated scenes on the life of Marie de Médicis (now Musée du Louvre). Rubens's work and his knowledge of the Venetian Renaissance painters notably influenced Watteau's technique and exquisite palette in which warm, brilliant tones prevailed. The time that Watteau spent in Audran's studio laid the foundations for his mature style, which was influenced by the type of interior design with arabesque motifs that prevailed at this period and which in turn influenced contemporary painting.

Watteau's relationship with the world of the theatre and masks is not entirely clear. There is no biographical information to suggest that he was directly engaged in music or the performing arts, nor even that he was knowledgeable about music or played an instrument. According to Georgia J. Cowart,¹ Watteau may have met professional musicians in the house of his friend and patron Pierre Crozat² and very probably in the circle of friends associated with his great patron Jean de Jullienne (1686-1766)³ (fig. 2).

The Comédie Italienne had established itself permanently in Paris around the mid-17th century. Its characters continued to be the original ones invented and performed in Italy, almost all of them male and most of them servants who generally devoted their time to intrigues or, at best, to assisting young couples or lovers to meet in secret, unknown to their parents or tutors. The Comédie Italienne used increasingly sophisticated and complex sets and its performances were further enhanced with *divertissements*.⁴ Around 1697, however, Louis XIV had it banned, annoyed by the continual criticisms and mockery of the role



Fig. 2
Nicolas-Henri Tardieu
Assis, au près de toi..., 1731
Engraving after a lost work by Watteau.

(Self-portrait of Watteau with Jean de Jullienne)
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris



Fig. 3
Jean Antoine Watteau
Pierrot content, ca. 1712
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid
[\[+ info\]](#)

of the monarchy by the Italian company. The company did not return to France until Philippe II d'Orléans, regent of the future Louis XV and a great admirer of music and the theatre, promoted its return. The Comédie Italienne thus returned to Paris, once again occupying the theatre in the Hôtel de Bourgogne.⁵

It was during the period of Louis XIV and the Régence (1715-1723) that Watteau established his style and subject matter. It was also at this time that the world of theatre and opera came to have a profound influence on art, soon becoming the favoured subject of numerous painters, together with balls, country fêtes and fêtes galantes. Watteau was accepted into the Académie as a painter specialising in such works.

Pierrot content (fig. 3) is an early painting by Watteau and is considered a magnificent example of his work due both to its quality and its subject matter. It is one of Watteau's earliest depictions of an outdoor fête galante.

The four figures in the foreground recall *Commedia dell'Arte* actors but they are simply shown as peacefully seated rather than as performing a play. Watteau locates them in the centre of the composition in a woodland clearing or garden, suggesting that he had a stage set in mind but this is not definitely the case. The subject of the Comédie Italienne is undoubtedly present in this enigmatic image but Watteau has chosen to focus on its essence, stripping it of any theatrical trappings: there is no performance nor any gestures or movements as we find in some of his earlier paintings. Apart from the guitar player, all the figures could be described as contemplative in mood and pose.

The figure of a man or woman playing the guitar (fig. 4) is a recurring one in Watteau's works in which music frequently appears, particularly in the fêtes galantes. In numerous drawings Watteau tried out the different poses that could be adopted when playing the guitar, an instrument that acquired great prestige and popularity at this period, to the point where even the young Louis XIV took classes with the great Italian guitarist Francesco Corbetta.

In *Pierrot content* (fig. 3) the woman holding a guitar wears a small ruff, a tightly fitting jacket and a skirt of the same shade as the elegant little hat that she wears. The position of her hands suggests that she is playing the guitar although she does not look at it. Apart from Pierrot⁶ she is the only figure to look directly at the viewer while she is also the focus of attention of the rest of the group. On her other side is Mezzetin⁷ who admires her with a rapturous expression. The group terminates on the right with a couple that turns towards the centre of the composition. The scene is completed by two further figures who are almost impossible to see in the present day but who look out among the background foliage and can be identified as another figure of Mezzetin or possibly Scaramouche, and Harlequin.⁸



Fig. 4
Jean Antoine Watteau
Study of a Woman playing the Guitar and holding a Piece of Music, ca. 1717-1718
Musée du Louvre, Département des arts Graphiques, Paris. Aimé-Charles Horace His de la Salle Collection, donated in 1878



Fig. 5
Edmé Jaurat
Pierrot content, 1728
Engraving after the painting by Watteau
in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid

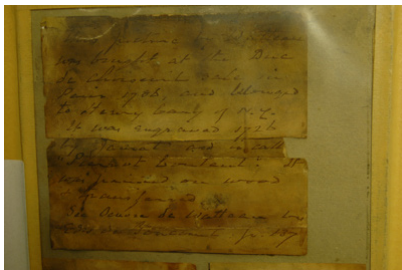


Fig.6
Pierrot content
Photograph of a detail of the label on the reverse
of the painting



Fig. 7
Jean Antoine Watteau
Pierrot content (detail),
ca. 1712
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza,
Madrid



Fig. 8
Jean Antoine Watteau
Pierrot, previously known
as *Gilles*, ca. 1718-1719.
Paris, Musée du Louvre

Watteau died young, probably aged thirty-seven, but his work remained in the public eye for many years due to the fact that most of his paintings were reproduced in the form of engravings that were commissioned and distributed by his patron Jean de Jullienne.⁹ *Pierrot content* (fig. 3) was also the subject of a print made by Edmé Jaurat (1688-1738) in 1728 (fig. 5), seven years after the artist's death, as is mentioned on one of the labels on the reverse of the painting (fig. 6).¹⁰

Jaurat's print has provided valuable information on the original state of the painting, which has been altered over time. At the lower edge of the print is the phrase "Engraved from the original work painted by Watteau, of the same size". However, the size of the painting as it is now is smaller than the print, suggesting that the canvas in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum was cut down on all sides at an unknown date and that it originally had a more horizontal format. In addition, in the print it is easier to identify the two figures concealed among the vegetation and which are now almost invisible in the painting due to Watteau's imperfect technique that has resulted in the paint darkening, particularly in this area of the canvas.

A careful observation of the painting also reveals various, easily visible changes to the composition that appear as pentimenti on the surface (fig. 7). One relates to the position of the female figure's head, which was originally closer to Pierrot but which Watteau altered by moving it further away so that she leans her chin on her fan in a gesture of disapproval. Another alteration is to be seen in the area around her feet as Watteau originally painted the drapery of her skirt to spread out further across the ground.

In the canvas in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum (fig. 3) the centre of the composition is occupied by Pierrot. In most of the depictions of this figure by Watteau he is shown as seated, positioned frontally and in a markedly static pose. Only rarely is he depicted standing, as in the celebrated painting in the Musée du Louvre (fig.8) entitled *Pierrot*, formerly known as *Gilles* in which his figure acquires the monumentality of a life-size portrait.

The painting in the Thyssen collection has been compared to other works by Watteau of the same period that also focus on the subject of jealousy and, in a broader sense, on the psychology of love. The closest in approach and composition to the present work is *Les Jaloux*, a lost work that was also painted in 1712 and which is known from a copy in the National Gallery of Melbourne and from a print by Gérard Jean-Baptiste Scotin (1671-1716) (fig. 9).

A comparison of the two works reveals a series of coincidences and differences that have provoked debate among experts as to which is the earlier of the two. The compositions are extremely similar but the number of figures in them is different. In *Pierrot content* (fig. 3) Watteau depicted a group of five principal figures while in *Les Jaloux*



Fig. 9
Gérard Jean-Baptiste Scotin
Les Jaloux (Invidiosi), 1726-1729
Engraving after a lost painting by Watteau
Trustees of the British Museum, London



Fig. 10
P.Q. Chedel
Harlequin Jaloux
Engraving after a lost painting by Watteau



Fig. 11
Jean Antoine Watteau
The Foursome (La Partie quarrée), ca. 1713
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Museum
Purchase, Mildred Anna Williams Collection

(fig. 9) the young man seated on the ground on the right has been replaced by a tambourine. The position of the group and poses of the figures are almost identical in the two works with the exception of the young woman on the right, whose disdain for Pierrot, expressed by the movement of her head, becomes a gesture of closeness towards him in *Les Jaloux*. Watteau depicts her smiling at him with an indulgent expression as she gently leans her hand on his shoulder. In both paintings Watteau has included a statue behind the figures, visible among the trees and depicting either Pan or a satyr, symbol of lust and comedy according to Donald Posner.¹¹ The garden in *Pierrot content* is embellished on the right with a pedestal topped by a ball while in *Les Jaloux* this element takes the form of an enigmatic sphinx that watches the scene, seemingly aware of the figures' secret desires.

The second work in this group is *Harlequin Jaloux* (fig. 10), also now lost and only known through prints of the composition. The scene, which seems to be set in a forest clearing rather than in a carefully tended garden, only includes three principal figures. Pierrot is seated on the ground, holding the guitar that rests on his legs. He shows no sign of being inclined to play it and looks out directly at the viewer. He is accompanied by a couple seated on the right in which the woman is the dominant figure while the man, possibly Mezzetin to judge from his dress, looks at her with an enraptured expression. Harlequin peers out from among the bushes behind them, jealously observing the scene.

La Partie quarrée (fig. 11) is a slightly later work. Watteau depicts his four principal characters, once again in a forest clearing or a garden. On this occasion Pierrot is shown standing and is seen from behind, observed by the two women sitting in front of him. His guitar hangs from his back on a red cord. The dress worn by the woman on the left is almost identical to that of the woman guitar player in *Pierrot content* in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, while the other woman holds a Venetian mask. It is known that this canvas was cut down in size in the same way as *Pierrot content*.¹² The background vegetation is not as abundant here, allowing Watteau to create two openings onto patches of intense blue sky that visually lighten the composition. In contrast to the other three scenes, this one is not presided over by a statue of Pan, while the sphinx in *Les Jaloux* (fig. 9) has been replaced by a Cupid on a dolphin, symbol of the impatience of love.¹³

Various preparatory drawings have survived for the figures to be seen in *Pierrot content* (fig. 3). Particularly notable is one in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen (fig. 12) that depicts the rigidly frontal figure of Pierrot exactly as it appears in the final canvas. For the figure of Mezzetin in the painting Watteau probably combined two drawings, one in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin of the head (fig. 14), which has been attributed to Nicolas Lancret (1690-1743) on occasions,



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Fig. 12
Pierrot
Rouen, Musée des Beaux-Arts

Fig. 13
Pierrot content (detail)

Fig. 14
Jean Antoine Watteau
Two Studies of an Actor;
Sketch of a Woman holding a Fan
Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin



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Fig. 15
Pierrot content (detail)

Fig. 16
Jean Antoine Watteau
Three Studies of Men,
one with a Violin
Private collection, New York



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Fig. 17
Pierrot content (detail)

Fig. 18
Jean Antoine Watteau
Three Studies of Men
Lost drawing (first at Brême,
Kunsthalle Kupferstichkabinett)



18



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Fig. 19
Pierrot content (detail)

Fig. 20
Jean Antoine Watteau
Studies of standing Men
and a seated Woman
Collection Mrs. Elliot Hodgkin, London



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Fig. 21
Pierrot content (detail)



Fig. 22
Lucian Freud
Portrait of Baron H.H. Thyssen-Bornemisza, 1981-1982
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid
[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 23
Lucian Freud
Large Interior W11 (after Watteau),
1981-1983
Private collection

and another of the body (fig. 16). Watteau took the man on the right from his drawing *Three Studies of Men* (fig. 18) and used it for the figure on the right of the painting. The young woman with the fan in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum painting appears in the drawing *Two standing Men and a seated Woman* (fig. 21). When transferring this figure to his painting Watteau altered the line of the head and the position of the right arm.

Watteau's only documented pupil was Jean-Baptiste Pater (1695-1736), who completed his master's commissions after his death and who also entered the Académie as a painter of *fêtes galantes*. Watteau's style was celebrated during his lifetime and he consequently had numerous followers, as a result of which the oeuvres of almost all the 18th-century French painters, particularly Lancret, Fragonard and Boucher, reveal the influence of this great artist, who is considered the first Rococo painter.

The canvas of *Pierrot content* (fig. 3) was acquired by Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza from Newhouse Galleries in New York in 1977. In 1972 the painting had been stolen from a warehouse just before it was due to be sent by plane to New York and was not recovered until 1976 by the FBI.¹⁴ The Baron's admiration for Watteau's painting was shared by the British painter Lucian Freud (1922-2011) who included a detail of it in the portrait that the Baron commissioned from him (fig. 22).¹⁵

Freud was fascinated by *Pierrot content*, both with regard to its composition and for its psychological study of the characters from the *Commedia dell'Arte* painted by Watteau. This interest led him to make a pastel copy of the central part of Watteau's canvas and inspired his own painting entitled *Large Interior W11 (after Watteau)* (fig. 23).

Notes



Fig. 24
Jean Antoine Watteau
Mezzetin, ca. 1718-1720
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York

- 1 See Cowart, Georgia J. "The Musical Theatre in Watteau's Paris" in *Watteau, Music, and Theater* [exhib. cat. 2009]. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009.
- 2 Pierre Crozat (1665-1740) was a wealthy French financier who assembled one of the most important art collections of his time, including paintings, drawings and works of art. Crozat was one of Watteau's patrons and commissioned from him the series on *The Four Seasons* for the decoration of one of the public rooms in his Paris hôtel.
- 3 Jean de Jullienne (1686-1766) was one of the most important French collectors of the 18th century and a leading art dealer. His activities as a publisher, particularly of the work of Watteau, brought him enormous renown in his own day.
- 4 *Divertissements*: a French term that refers to a group of dances, songs including Italian arias or French chansons, acrobatic or magic acts or short theatrical numbers that could be related or unrelated to the principal *Commedia dell'Arte* work being performed.
- 5 The theatre opened around 1548. It was built over the ruins of the palace of the dukes of Burgundy. It became the leading public theatre in Europe and the first of the permanent theatres that would later contribute significantly to Parisian cultural life.
- 6 Pierrot: A French derivation of the *Commedia dell'Arte* character known as *Pedrolino*. He is generally depicted wearing a cream or white suit with a collar and a wide-brimmed hat. Depictions of this character normally present him in a static pose and with a dreamy or doltish expression and a slightly lost look (see fig. 8).
- 7 Mezzetin (fig. 24): wearing his traditional costume of pantaloons, cape and cap in pink, blue-green and white striped cloth, this *Commedia dell'Arte* character is a humble servant like Harlequin. Also attracted to intrigues, he is, however, more cultivated than the others and extremely fond of music. He is thus generally shown as dancing or playing an instrument.
- 8 Harlequin: *Arlecchino* in Italian, this character from the *Commedia dell'Arte* plays the role of servant. On occasions he is presented as the suitor of Columbine and thus the rival of Pierrot. Harlequin wears a suit with a diamond pattern, initially made from scraps to indicate his humble social status but later from richer and more sophisticated fabrics. Harlequin has a great sense of humour and enlivens the stage with his acrobatic tricks.
- 9 The close relationship between the artist and collector was studied in the exhibition *Esprit et Vérité: Watteau and his Circle*, Wallace Collection, London, 12 March to 5 June 2011, which included paintings by Watteau alongside other works from Jullienne's collection.
- 10 On the reverse of the painting is a hand-written label in English that refers to Edmond de Goncourt and reads: "It was engraved in 1726 by Jaurat and is called 'Pierrot Content'" (see fig. 6).
- 11 See Posner, Donald: *Antoine Watteau*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, p. 56.
- 12 See *Watteau, Music, and Theater* (exhib. cat. 2009). New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009, p. 26.
- 13 See Posner, Donald: *Antoine Watteau*. London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, p. 57.
- 14 According to a letter from Marco Grassi in the documentary archive of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Dept. of Old Master Paintings.
- 15 See Alarcó, Paloma: *Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Maestros Modernos*. Madrid, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, 2009, pp. 476-477.