ROCOCO TO REVOLUTION

Major Trends in Eighteenth-Century Painting

MICHAEL LEVEY

154 illustrations, 22 in colour

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T & H

THAMES AND HUDSON

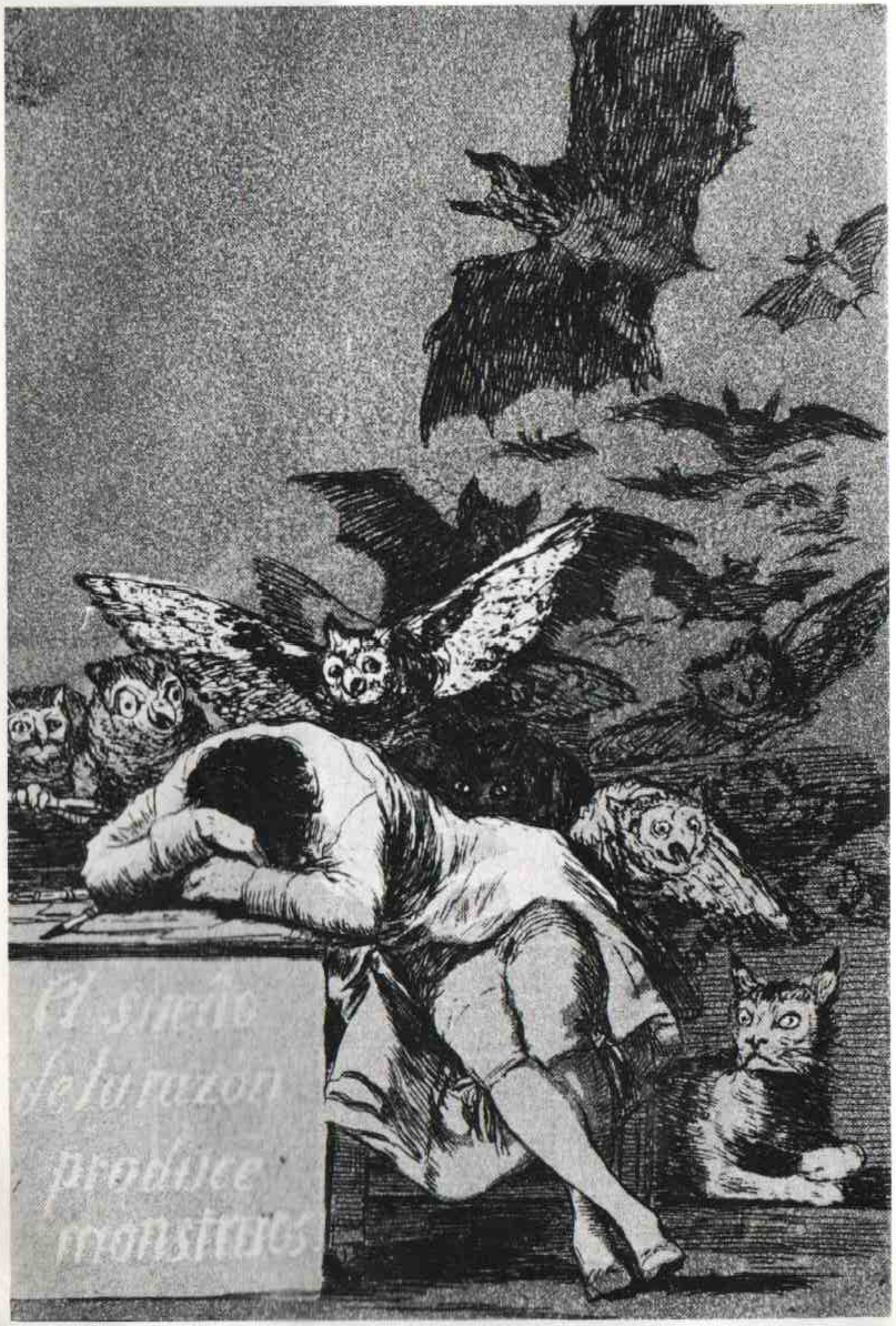
Preface

This book is based on a series of lectures given at Cambridge during my tenure there as Slade Professor of Art. I hope I did not choose the subject because it was somehow my 'field' – not wishing to be treated like a donkey, I deny having a field – but because I still think eighteenth-century art largely misunderstood, and under-estimated as a result. Since I was not compiling a history of painting during that century, I had often to omit artists, even great artists, from my discussion of some selected themes. I could not force them into the lectures; and in the case of Gainsborough I have thus lost one of the clearest demonstrations that the eighteenth century did produce great art.

Of course I do not really believe that I shall convert any unbelievers. Puritan prejudice dies hard against an age that so often frankly expressed its intention to enjoy itself. And its painting suffers in comparison with the articulate brilliance of its literature and the supreme accomplishment of its music – suffers all the more in that few intellectuals of the period esteemed contemporary painting very highly. Some people too will always feel secretly that older works of art are finer than more recent ones; to them Chartres *must* be greater than Vierzehnheiligen.

There was certainly appropriateness in dealing with a century of elegance as well as talent while enjoying the privilege of a Fellowship at King's. I shall always be grateful for that pleasant social time, and for the kindness and help I received from so many people. Such as it is, this book is dedicated as a token of gratitude – and with a tag construed as the eighteenth century construed it – to the Provost and Fellows of King's: *Et in Arcadia ego.*

1966 M. L.


El sueño de la razon produce monstruos

1 Francisco de Goya *The Sleep of Reason produces Monsters*

Introduction

The eighteenth century started with a dilemma; and it ended with a Revolution. Throughout the period it had been revolving at a furious pace, in a series of cartwheels of which the final, least foreseeable, was Napoleon. He might seem almost to return the century to the point from which it had started. 'I purified the Revolution,' he declared, 'dignified Nations and established Kings.' Another turn of the wheel was to show that there was no going back to such simple, autocratic solutions, propounded by one man. Nineteenth-century Europe had become too complex and too realistic.

The dilemma of the eighteenth century was political, philosophical and artistic. Assuming that what was natural was right, the period concentrated on the definition of Nature. Constant re-definition of this term led to a steady series of miniature artistic revolutions of which the latest coincided with political Revolution and produced the perfect political artist in David. The rococo itself had been a 'natural' reaction against formality, and by another definition it was to appear artificial and unnatural. It was not *true*; but then art that was true was not always adequate, for it might be undignified or might fail to contain the higher truth of morality. Perhaps moral truth lay only in antiquity, in a world undisturbed by the Christian religion, or perhaps it lay in the sheer scientific facts newly discovered by the eighteenth century.

What was not in doubt was the increasingly violent collision of opposing forces, whether politically they were autocracy and liberty, or artistically rococo and neo-classicism, or the ancients versus the moderns. These were all to some extent labels for the basic clash between conscious and unconscious mind. Something was all the time felt to be suppressed, and therefore always threatening to rise. Like the Lisbon earthquake, the fall of the Bastille was tremendously important merely as a symbol. Optimism and belief in nature as a guide were to be shot to pieces by the fusillades which followed. Goya records – more clearly and more tragically than any other artist – the mad new world where men massacre men. Thence onwards European affairs are conducted like a symphony of artillery; old ideals, old régimes, old confidence, and old art forms too, disappear in the smoke of battle which clears only after Waterloo.

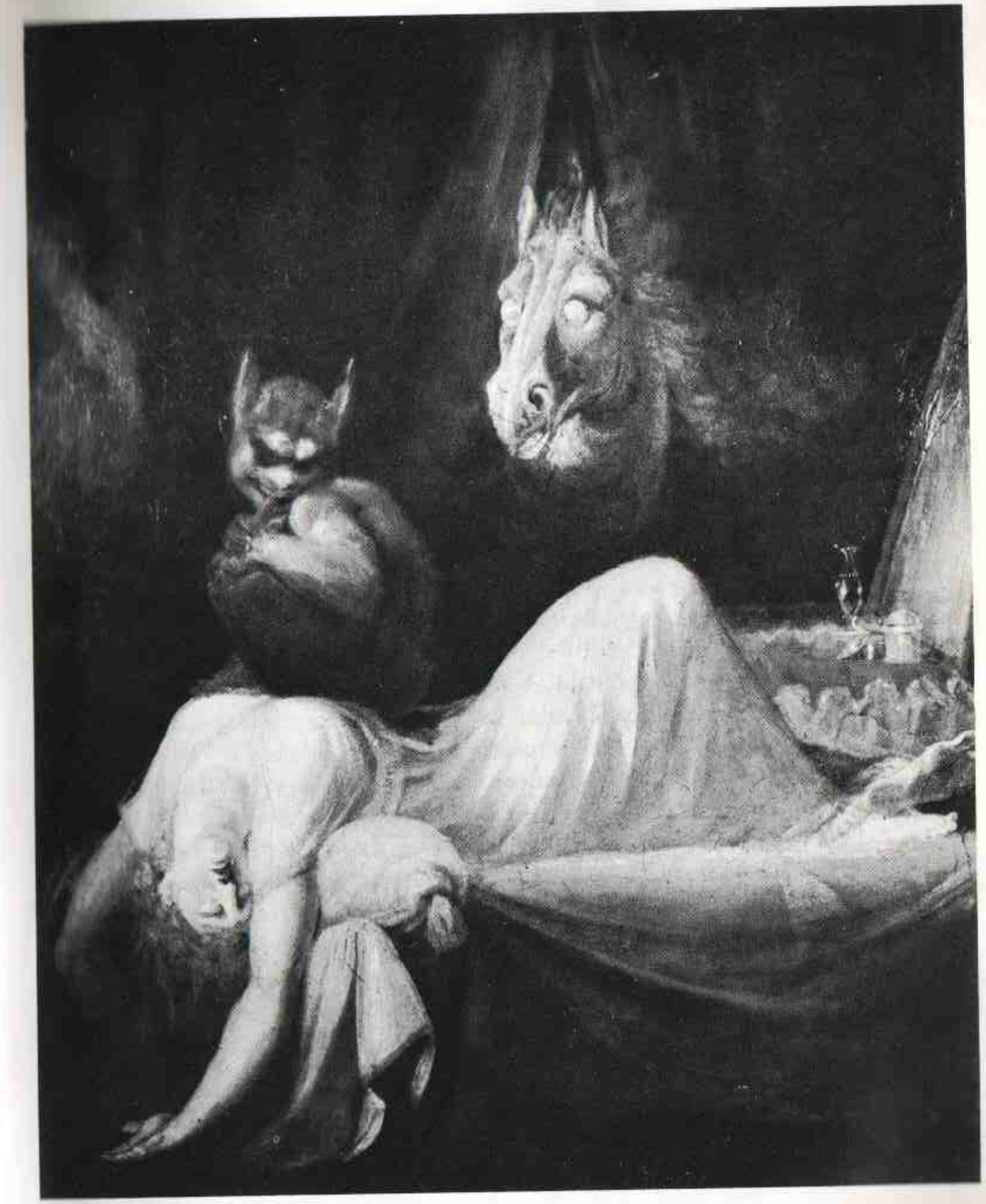
Modern consciousness, in literature not history, might be said to have been born there. Two great novels, *Vanity Fair* and *La Chartreuse de Parme*, make brilliant use of the battle. Both Thackeray and Stendhal are partly of the eighteenth century; they set out from that premise, as it were, guided by reason but aware of its frailty; and they end up in profound irony bordering upon despair. Waterloo marks the end of so many illusions – not least those of George Osborne 'lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart'. And it is on that battlefield that Stendhal sets wandering a positive anti-hero in Fabrizio del Dongo, the Candide of the nineteenth century.

The problem that had faced the previous century was really humanity's. Nature was connected with knowledge; what was desperately needed, increasingly so, was art that mirrored the interests of ordinary people and ceased to be merely decoration for aristocratic settings. In very different ways this requirement was pressed by Diderot, Reynolds, Winckelmann – and is particularly the characteristic of the second half of the century. A French historian, Rulhière, on being welcomed in 1787 to the Académie singled out the year 1749 as that when love of *belles-lettres* was exchanged for love of philosophy, when the desire to instruct replaced the desire to please.

But the problem lay in the possibility of other, less laudable desires which might be equally natural and quite conceivably stronger. In some ways there was more free fantasy in the rococo than in the moral, more 'truthful' art which replaced it. A rational mental structure could be constructed by the eighteenth century as beautifully as its buildings were; yet this structure was known to be raised on potentially dangerous foundations. The situation was perfectly expressed by Pope who asked a question to which nobody knew the answer:

With terrors round, can reason hold her throne,
Despise the known, nor tremble at the unknown?
Survey both worlds, intrepid and entire,
In spite of witches, devils, dreams and fire?

This was expressing partly, but in more urgent form, an awareness which Addison had shown in his essay on *Pleasures of Imagination* in speaking of the way the



2 Henry Fuseli *The Nightmare*

fancy can be overrun by monsters of its own framing. Addison's essay was translated into Spanish at the end of the eighteenth century and may well have been known to Goya. Certainly it is Goya who takes up the idea, no longer asking but stating: 'The sleep of reason produces monsters.' This is the caption used for the etching in the *Caprichos* series (*Ill. 1*) which was originally intended, significantly, to be the title plate of the whole book. While the artist dreams, deserted by reason, night monsters float frighteningly about him. Perhaps it is not too wild to suppose that the actual cat, with its startlingly large ears, has suggested the cluster of owl-like creatures who in turn seem to blend into long-eared bats.

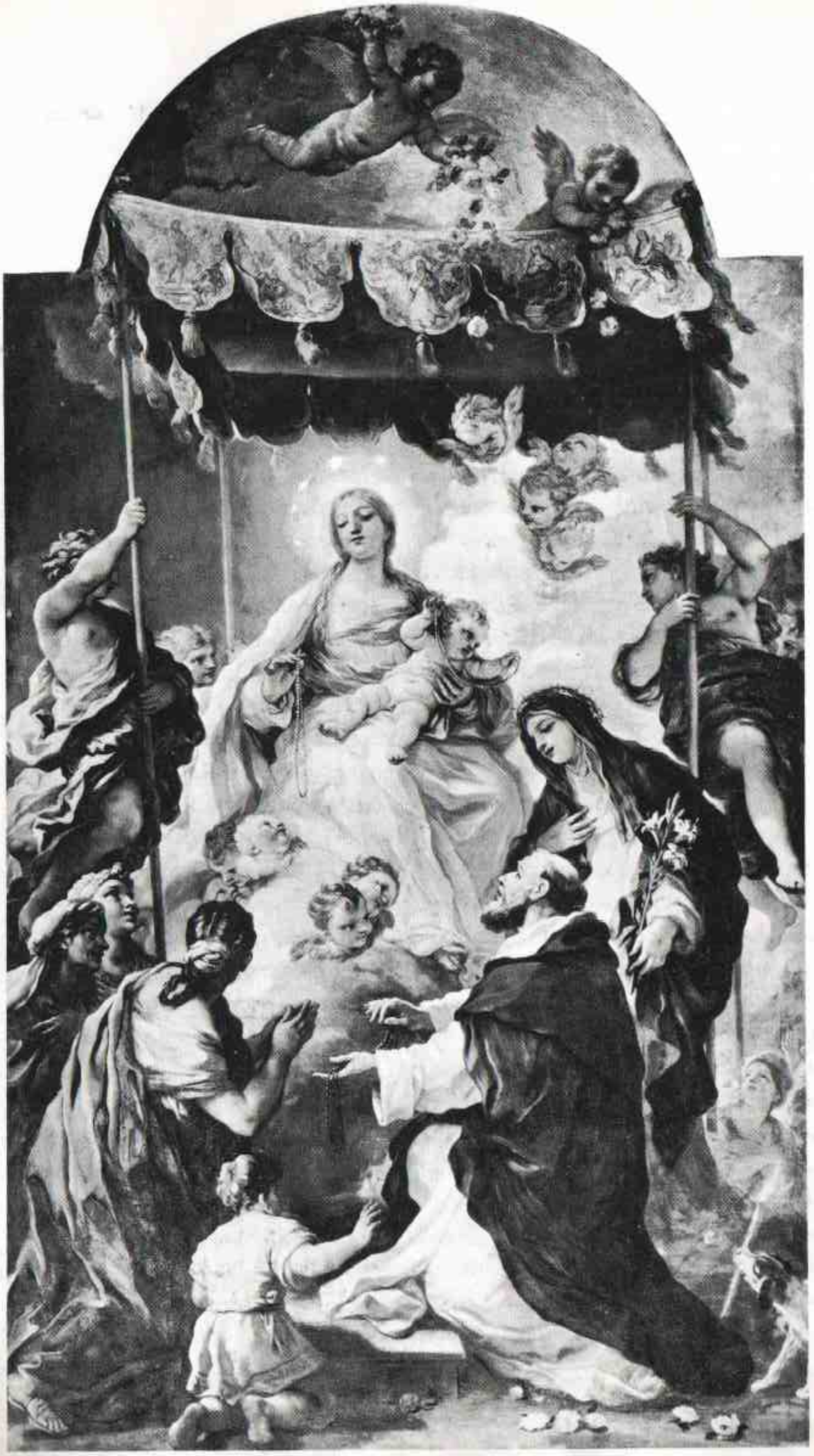
An ordinary domestic creature is transfigured, when reason is relaxed and the mind a prey to sick fancy, into a flock of evil things – all connected with darkness and night – which come in a filmic way to haunt the exhausted artist who is Goya himself. Other painters, such as Fuseli, had shown an interest in 'witches, devils, dreams…', but Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (*Ill. 2*) is ludicrously rational when compared with the genuine psychological sense of oppression conveyed by Goya's composition – with its ceaseless beat of wings darkening the air, and with, too, its suggestion that these horrible creatures come from within the mind.

It is just this sort of psychological awareness that so often eluded the eighteenth-century artist – or which he preferred to let elude him. Reason and sanity kept him sober, and sober work usually turned out to be much better than attempts at the highly emotional or deeply dramatic. Tragedies like those of Voltaire and Dr Johnson are intolerably boring, whereas even the slightest comedies retain some charm and ability to please. Beaumarchais, creator of the great comic figure of the eighteenth-century stage, Figaro, no hero but a valet-cum-barber, was also the author of the tearful inanities of *La Mère coupable* – a play more heartless and artificial in its sentimentality than any rococo piece of *marivaudage*.

Nevertheless, *La Mère coupable* represents conscious reaction, as much as do the comparable pictures of Greuze. Since reason did not seem to solve the century's problems, neither political nor artistic ones, it was replaced by a cult of feeling. Reason requires some sort of intellect and discipline. Feeling is everyone's prerogative – and excuse: 'his heart's in the right place'. Unfortunately, feeling may be as strong in those whose hearts are in the wrong place. If, at the worst, eighteenth-century art was all boudoir prettiness and rouge and fans, it at least avoided the blood and carnage of Romantic painting – in which it is often hard to tell if the artist is condemning or enjoying cruelty.

Between these extremes of the trivial and cruel Goya was neatly placed by the accident of birth, but he made perfect use of the accident: he bridged the rococo and the revolutionary in a unique way. Though it is customary to say, and it is undoubtedly true, that he influenced Delacroix and Manet, and can be claimed as a forerunner of modern art, neither of these artists had anything like his penetration into the situation of mankind. Indeed, such painters had little interest in it; it was left to Van Gogh to be concerned with states of mind, and with mankind. Goya himself remained basically of the century into which he was born; he carried forward into a period of romantic irrationalism some sort of belief in reason as a guide, even while depicting the horrific results of reason's breakdown.

There is perhaps more continuity in his art than the history of events during his lifetime would suggest. The rococo world which represented fashionable art when he was young had itself been part of a revolution concerned with people and behaviour. When still novel it had aimed to be more realistic than the grandiose concepts of the baroque. Instead of autocratic art it produced the social art of Watteau, replacing, as it were, Versailles by Paris. When Goya executed his early decorative tapestry cartoons for the Spanish royal palaces the subjects of these were not patriotic in the sense Louis XIV would have understood; instead of victories and rulers, they depict the ordinary life of Spanish people. The land is tacitly revealed as belonging not to the ruler but to everyone. Watteau's people are elegant where Goya's are peasant-clumsy; Watteau's are idlers, leisure-lovers, peacocks beside Goya's busy barnfowls who scrape for a living. But then Watteau has already achieved a revolution, an elegant and civilized one, by escaping from the huge gilded palace of baroque art into the natural atmosphere of parks and gardens. It was *natural* to ask for air and lightness and grace. This naturalness belonged to the rococo painters; they, like the rest of their century, were following Nature. But they were not imitating natural appearances. They invoked imagination; and thus a period supposedly restricted by its rationality saw the triumphant careers of Boucher and Tiepolo.



3 LUCA GIORDANO *Madonna del Baldacchino*

CHAPTER ONE

Intimations of Rococo

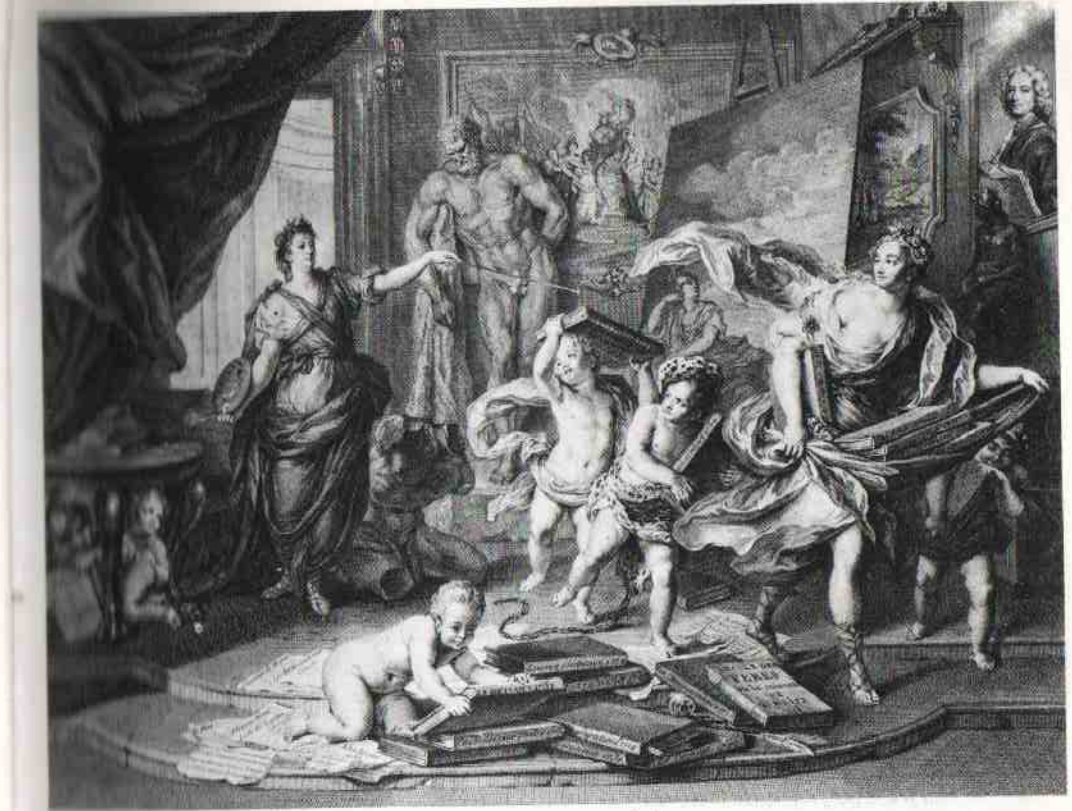
Perhaps it is untrue that there ever was any rococo painting; and certainly it is one of the most puny styles in the brood spawned by art-historians. It could not exist without the baroque and is conceivably no more than the baroque tamed and cut down for a more civilized age, one with a sense of humour too. Wit plays a new part in art in the eighteenth century, respecting neither Church nor State; the rococo is a sort of wit, in its movement and economy and surprise. This became, if not a style, at least an anti-style. Looking back to the seventeenth century it dared to see something absurd in the pomposities and grandeur that men like Urban VIII or Louis XIV had striven so hard to achieve. Already when Matthew Prior visited Versailles he judged it by reasonable standards and found the king ludicrous: 'His house at Versailles is something the foolishest in the world; he is galloping in every ceiling, and if he turns to spit he must see himself in person, or his Vice-regent the Sun…'

That may be the extreme of English commonsense when confronted by the baroque. But even in France and Italy, the eighteenth century opened with some diminution of reckless splendour – forced on France by near-bankruptcy if by nothing else – and a growing uneasiness about too-grand gestures. Reason had finally to trickle in, even in countries sworn to combat it by every form of superstition and still engaged in losing the battle today. England was to have no native baroque or rococo painting. Even Italy, which might claim to be the home of the baroque, did not provide such splendid opportunities for its greatest decorative painter of the period, Tiepolo, as did both Germany and Spain.

Nearly everywhere there was a tendency for decorative painting to be less solemn, to prefer themes of love to those of glory. Rulers themselves not only laid less emphasis on allegories of their own power but in some instances – like those of Frederick of Prussia and Catherine the Great – they conformed to a more enlightened and less despotic concept of the ruler. Though the child Louis XV was to be portrayed in virtually the pose and trappings worn by his predecessor, he grew up to be an enlightened ruler in the sense of being a less public person, though perhaps also a less responsible one. Reason had taken the wind out of the sails both of baroque art and of the chief people who supported it. The standards set by the baroque were essentially those that are unattainable for ordinary humanity; it does not please or amuse but stuns the spectator. The rococo treats a solemn theme light-heartedly, if it has to treat one at all, and prefers to evoke a civilized climate with emphasis on those things that education can give. It may be an absurdly rose-tinted view of life, but it has some connection with experience; it may even express a quite profound truth about the human heart – one more profound than can ever be detected in miles of battle pictures. Montesquieu, so much wiser than the majority of his countrymen at any period, struck the eighteenth-century humanist note: '*Je suis homme avant d'être Français.*' If reason rejects the idea of self-glorification which is Versailles, the reaction of Romanticism was to turn back to the seventeenth century, stirred by martial associations, and to dedicate the palace to what is still patently proclaimed on the building: '*A toutes les gloires de la France.*' Shameful years of civilized peace are thus abolished.

But it was in those very years that art had enjoyed a genuine freedom: from autocratic propaganda, from being historically true or didactically moral. They did not last long, at least in France, but the sense of liberation is amusingly conveyed in Charles Coypel's *Painting ejecting Thalia* (*Ill. 4*) which was executed in 1732 and which is as lively and unprejudiced as were Coypel's writings at the period before he became Director of the Académie Royale and first painter to the King. The Muse of History is shown by Coypel hurrying off with her attendants, trying to gather up what learned tomes they may, all summarily ejected from the studio by Painting. Coypel made his point in words too; he recognized the social nature of art, its aim, and the fact that therefore everyone, not only the connoisseur, is entitled to give his opinion: '*Les beaux-arts sont faits pour toutes les personnes de bon sens et d'esprit...*'

With that criterion it was obvious that the grand manner of the baroque must give way as art catered for a wider audience. Freedom from academic learning encouraged the utterly un-serious classical mythologizing of Boucher in which antiquity becomes an excuse for not wearing clothes. In Venice, where there was a long tradition of unlearned painting, Tiepolo was able to create his vision of an impossible antique world, fused from Veronese, the opera, and his own



4 Charles-Antoine Coypel *Painting ejecting Thalia*

imagination. Lesser painters could produce charming decorations with barely any serious subject-matter at all – Pellegrini is an example of a painter who worked with success throughout Europe and whose style is almost *tachiste*.

The new sense of art's freedom is conveniently symbolized on the threshold of the new century by the election to the Académie at Paris in 1699 of Roger de Piles. At first de Piles had appeared to be simply an intelligent amateur who pleaded the cause of colour and championed Titian's art. Then he challenged the superiority of the Roman School; he attacked Poussin and was sub-acid about antiquity: '*Il n'est pas nécessaire d'estre toujours parmi les dieux ni dans la Grèce.*' He raised the cry in favour of a new artist – new in French academic circles – Rubens. The hegemony of Italy, combined with the ancients, was rudely challenged by claims for a painter who was not even French. The opposing party naturally rallied to the cause of Poussin, and de Piles' championship of Rubens continued to bring him into bitter conflict with the Académie throughout the late years of the seventeenth century. The sheer violence his opinions met prepares the way for much later attacks on rococo decorative art; and how could a painter like Pellegrini escape abuse when Rubens was under attack? Conservatism not only clung to the bulwark of the ancients (throwing in Poussin quite as if he had been Apelles' contemporary) but became hysterical at the possibility of artistic freedom. The crime of Rubens was '*cette grande liberté*' in his art which is not only the essence of his genius but which could also serve to justify the liberties taken by the rococo.

Both parties in the quarrel appealed to tradition. The rococo went forward not out of reaction but in emulation of the baroque. Far from totally rejecting the art of the past, it merely picked out those painters who had been unwitting pioneers of it, showing a preference for those painters who had been most painterly. The admission of de Piles to the Académie gave respectable recognition to what had already become an artistic tendency. *Rubénisme* was in effect a European movement, practised by artists not only in France but in Italy. From the late years of the seventeenth century must date Luca Giordano's *Allegory of Rubens* (Prado, Madrid) which is frank homage to a painter whose impact had been particularly marked on the Neapolitan School since the arrival there about 1640 of his sumptuous large-scale *Feast of Herod.*

In France *Rubénisme* triumphed explicitly, and *Poussinisme* was defeated. Neither camp had really comprehended the true natures of the artists they warred over (for Rubens was a serious student of antiquity and Poussin possessed a vein of wild poetry) and the battle itself was only one incident in the clash between ancients and moderns which was to break out again in the late eighteenth century. Then *Poussinisme* had its revenge.

Perhaps the rococo – in so far as it was a movement at all – had too little vitality because of its typically eighteenth-century consciousness of tradition. There is a certain frightening truth in Voltaire's comment to Madame du Boccage: '*Notre siècle vit sur le crédit du siècle de Louis XIV.*' Taste might prefer to be overshadowed by the greatness of Rubens instead of that of Poussin, but the overshadowing was still there. Refining and diluting the baroque, fitting it for smaller rooms and a more light-hearted atmosphere, was soon to lead to artistic extinction.

Reason did play its part, first in requiring so many pictures to be just decoration, and then in making such work seem intolerably trivial and ephemeral.

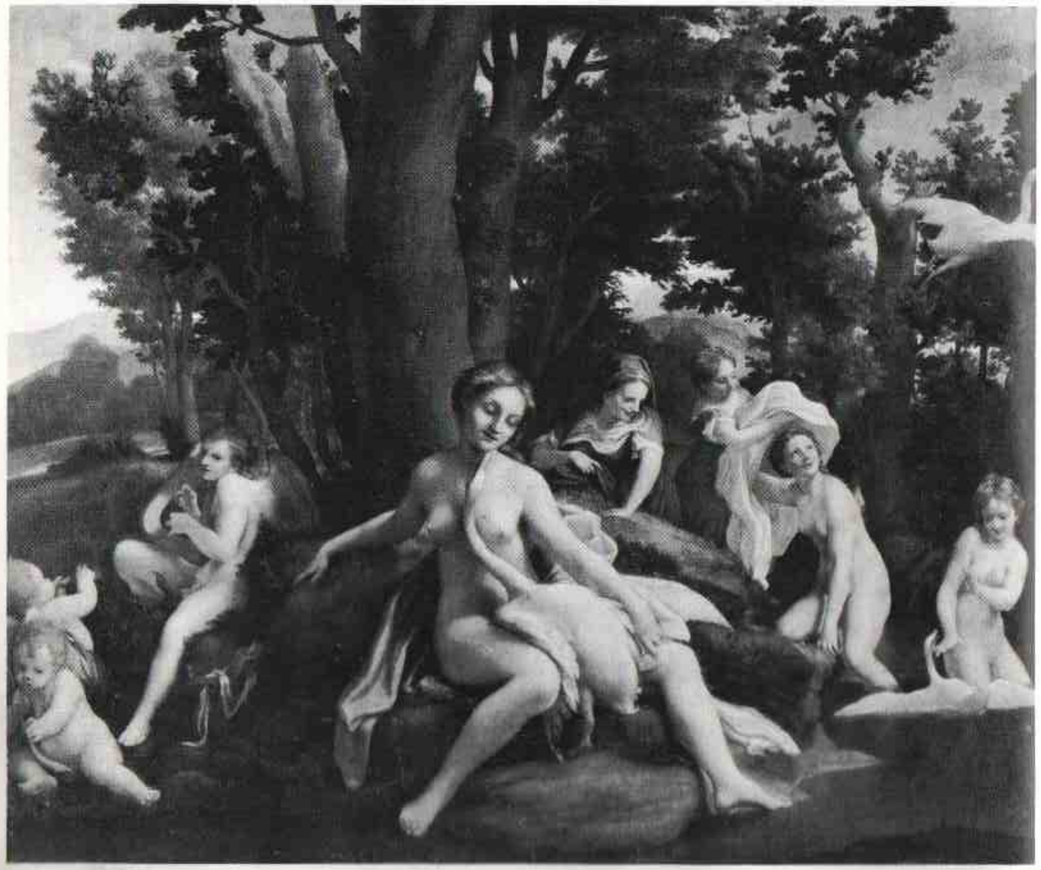
Failure to try to touch the heart was likely to lead to a fashion for wearing hearts on sleeves. The rococo world of beauty, confidence, health, could easily be shown to be false – no one had ever believed it was literally true – and guilty because of its traditional role: propaganda for keeping things as they are, lulling people by fairy stories of visions. (The neo-classic was to be guilty too, in a different way; and it too was to possess no more vitality than the rococo.) If the rococo seemed alluring, the more need to denounce it. The eighteenth-century moralist must have felt in front of it something of the disgust which fills us when we see the facts of our civilization glamourized in glossy magazines. The discrepancy is disgusting, but art has no duty to reflect life in the way increasingly required by the eighteenth century. It has no duty but to be art; when it failed to possess a social purpose – when, that is to say, it was often at its most imaginatively inspired – it was at its most vulnerable. The dilemma of art and life was merely part of the century's basic dilemma. It drove Romantic artists on to the deliberate un-socialness of much of their art and eventually, in some cases, to suicide. Among other victims was to be Ruskin, driven insane by the irreconcilability.

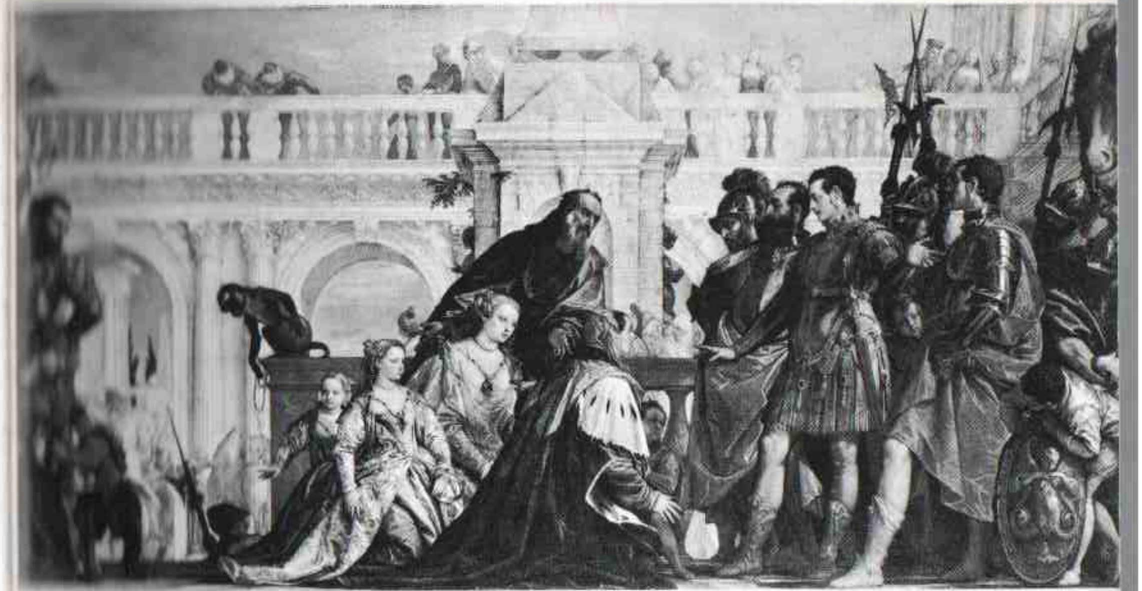
It is sometimes easier to appreciate why the rococo was attacked than to appreciate the art itself. The conventions which governed it can easily be made to seem as absurd as operatic conventions, understandably enough, for the two were closely connected. Yet it should nowadays be possible for us to respond to art that has deliberately removed itself from the task of recording natural appearances. The canon of rococo realism – decorative realism – was to be clearly defined by Braque when he said: 'A vase in one of my paintings is not a utensil which will hold water, but an object re-created for a new purpose.' All the vases in the work of rococo decorators could not hold water for a moment; they have been re-created in art, and so has the water which flows like watered silk in rococo paintings.

The tradition tacitly invoked by the rococo went back far beyond Rubens and could claim two great *cinquecento* founder-painters in Correggio and Veronese. Though they had never lost their fame, they were particularly to be appreciated, with renewed warmth, in an age that looked for freedom, colourfulness, and charm in art. Above all, it looked for allure rather than instruction, and the delight it found in Correggio's *Leda and the Swan* (*Ill. 5*) was not connected with learned mythology but frank enjoyment of the playfully erotic. It was right that this picture should belong to the Duc d'Orléans, then Regent of France, and notorious for his dissoluteness. Partly repainted by Charles Coypel, it must have exercised a decisive influence on Boucher and provided Fragonard with several hints. So perfectly *dix-huitième* does it at first glance appear that it is hard to believe it originated about 1530. In fact, its melting mood is not truly rococo but the picture is full of rococo themes, with its smiling naked girls and saucy swans (both sinuously swaying in those typical Correggio curves which Mengs was to be among the first to analyse) set in an enchanted countryside of placid water and thick-foliaged trees: an afternoon idyll where a bathe and rape become almost the same thing, both to be enjoyed. Love's suggestiveness is everywhere – not only in the lyre-playing Cupid who serenades the couple but in the very uprights of the tree trunks and the channel of the river.

Although Veronese was assiduously collected, especially in France, the key picture by him remained in Venice, in Palazzo Pisani: *The Family of Darius before Alexander* (*Ill. 6*). Probably this was the most famous and popular picture in the whole city during the eighteenth century. It is, as it were, the *Oath of the Horatii* for the rococo – and it survived that fashion. Its influence on the new generation of Venetian painters, on Tiepolo above all, was enormous. It was copied and pastiched. The Président de Brosses believed he owned Veronese's original sketch for it – as did many other gullible people. Goethe learnedly analysed what was happening in the picture. So many people paused before it, and it is worth pausing before. It represents at its most splendid the Shakespearean anachronism of an antique historical subject treated as a Renaissance pageant. Like *Antony and Cleopatra*, it is concerned with the meeting of East and West; it shows Greece conquering Persia, but conquered by magnanimity. A great empire has been reduced to the kneeling women at Alexander's feet. In the sheer shock of contact and contrast there is glamour, and also perhaps a lesson, for the eighteenth century – less certain than Veronese that the West stands for civilization. There is a moral exemplum in the picture: it depicts – on a world stage and on enormous, crowded scale – clemency at the moment of victory, courtesy rather than bravery. For *his* period Veronese tells the right story. The eighteenth century, liking to reverse the effect (as in Cleopatra's conquest of Antony), reversed the clemency theme as well. Frederick the Great wrote an opera about the Incas in which Montezuma is noble and the Christian Pizzaro a tyrant. And in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* Mozart pointed his plot with badly behaved Christians and a most magnanimous hero in the Turkish Pasha.

5 ANTONIO CORREGGIO *Leda and the Swan*





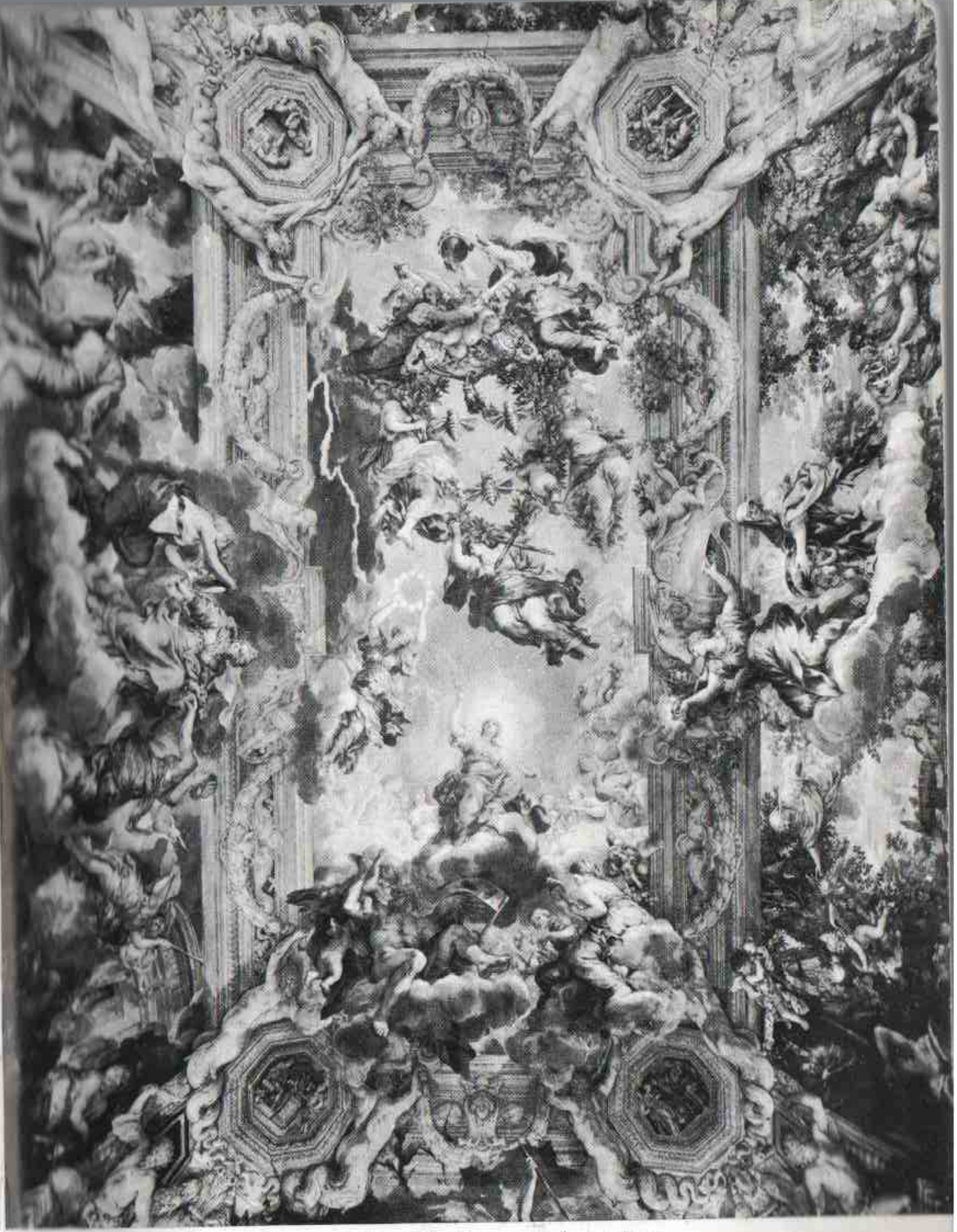
6 PAOLO VERONESE *The Family of Darius before Alexander*

Veronese catered for all tastes. He was unlearned, brilliantly free in handling and rich in tonality – no one who knows the picture can forget the sketch-like spontaneity of the pink-cloaked rider on a white horse in the left background – and yet his composition is carefully planned and weighted by a deliberate moral. And then, by a paradox, the setting and the figures of this meeting of two worlds recalled *cinquecento* Venice; and the picture enshrines the myth of that empire, a myth with so much power that it is almost true. It was, said contemporaries, as if the sleeping beauty of Veronese's art had awoken to life again when in the early eighteenth century Venetian decorative painters travelled and were welcomed in England, France, Germany and Spain.

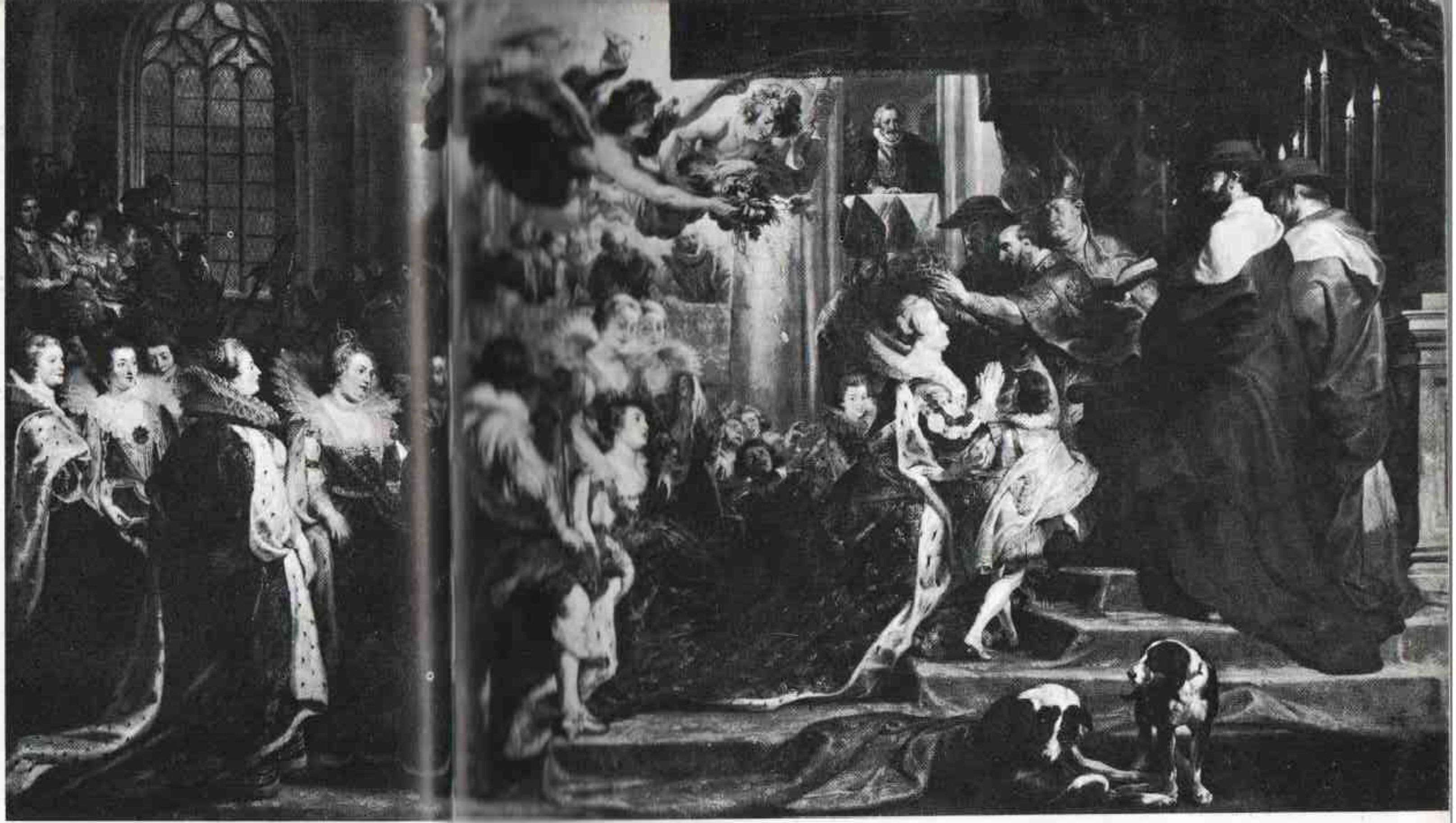
The decorative ideals which might be represented by blending Correggio and Veronese had never really died out. Carried into Northern Europe most supremely by Rubens, they were positively localised in Paris in the Marie de Médicis series painted for the Luxembourg Gallery and which were to exercise a potent influence on diverse artists. One of the most splendid of the series, the *Coronation of Marie de Médicis* (*Ill. 8*) is a picture which cuts across all the preconceptions of art history. The brilliance of its colour, the authority of its design, its combination of the allegorical and the natural – from light-bathed, radiant, winged genii to the casual dogs – appealed to David almost as much as to Watteau. Watteau was to borrow the curled-up dog; and David was to utilize the design for his *Sacre de Napoléon*.

For many French artists the seeds of the rococo style lay in Rubens; sometimes they experienced his work before they reached Italy or, as in the case of Watteau and Nattier, they never reached Italy at all. Nattier himself was to be a direct disseminator of the Luxembourg Gallery by his drawings of the Rubens compositions which were engraved with the permission of Louis XIV. But there was also Italy, not only as a place of pilgrimage for young foreign painters but in its own tradition of the rococo that can be traced from Correggio and Veronese to Pietro da Cortona and thence directly to Giordano and Sebastiano Ricci. In this quite closely linked chain the merging of baroque into rococo can hardly be detected, and if any century is significant it is the hundred years that run from 1633 to 1733: from the Barberini ceiling (*Ill. 7*) to the death of Ricci (actually occurring in May 1734).

All these painters had been concerned with problems of decoration in actual rooms, with the necessary tricks of perspective and illusionism, glorying in being false as conjurers do. Cortona's Barberini ceiling initiates, with a thunderous crash, the high baroque style; though so crushing and autocratic in its total effect,



7 PIETRO DA CORTONA *Ceiling of the Palazzo Barberini, Rome*



8 Peter Paul Rubens
The Coronation of Marie de Médicis

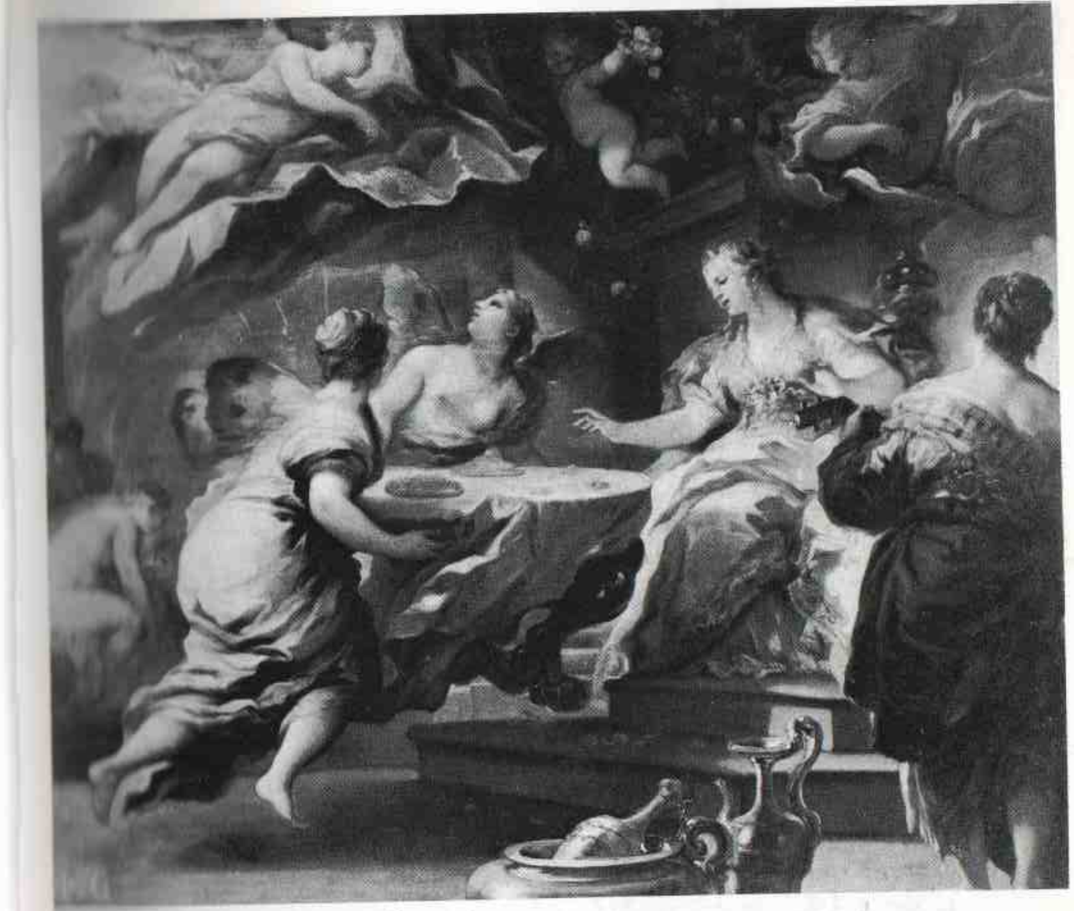
the right-hand portion is more lyrical and charming, playful for all its supposedly serious subject. It hardly matters what is being depicted amid so many birds and *putti*, flowers, a fountain, clouds, and a graceful, air-borne vision. All the elements are present that will serve to make magic gardens for Armida, settings for other allegories, of love rather than dynastic ambitions; the vocabulary is here, and was to be provided by Cortona even more plentifully in his easel pictures, which was borrowed down to the very poses and gestures, by Luca Giordano. When Pietro da Cortona died in 1669, Giordano was already well-launched on a career of great fame and wide travel.

Giordano was the ideal rococo painter, speedy, prolific, dazzling in colour, assured in draughtsmanship, ever-talented and never touching the fringe of genius. Cortona's mood was often disconcertingly light-hearted, his Rapes and Sacrifices looking like ballets performed by over-eager amateurs, but Giordano's fluent brush-strokes created pictures without any heart at all. Everything is excited but nothing is really happening of any significance. Nobody cares and there is anyway hardly any individual present: for Giordano refines the persons of Cortona's invention into positive types, often only a summary elegant gesture and, significantly, a head turned away completely hiding the face. These are the economies which Giordano judges must be made in the interests of decoration; he made them increasingly, never failing to fill the largest spaces with something delightfully silvery and inventive, preferably with banks of convenient cloud, fluttering *putti*, and the promise of blue sky beyond. The lack of intellectual power his work displays – its sheer brilliant brainlessness – is itself admirable and perhaps the necessary concomitant of such tireless productivity.

Working in Naples and Rome and Florence and Venice, and then active for a decade in Spain, Giordano disseminated a manner which could hardly fail to allure when combined with his speed and *serviable* quality. He took the baroque and painlessly squeezed profundity out of it, twisting the style to make its effects by economical means, astonishing and delighting but never imposing, and himself always producing a virtuoso solution. Part of his success undoubtedly lay in the fact that he was moving in the direction that taste was already going (he was by no means the only Neapolitan painter to lighten his palette and shift into a Venetian-Rubensian idiom from a Caravaggesque one). His paintings express a wish above all to please – whatever their destination.

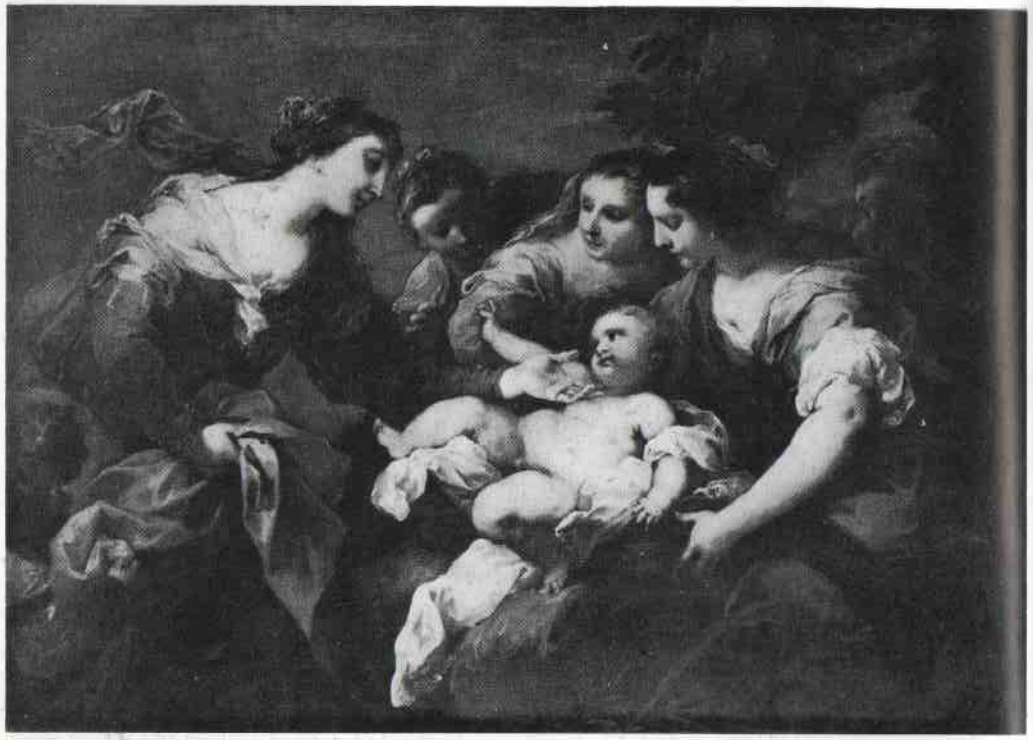
The series of twelve small pictures at Hampton Court of the story of Cupid and Psyche shows Giordano's ability to play a tune of infinite variations around the theme of love; the pitch between solemn and trivial is exactly observed, chromatically charming but never forced. The *Psyche Feasting* (*Ill. 9*) is a typically magic moment, with music sounding and flowers falling about the surprised girl, mysteriously served in Cupid's palace by butterfly-winged attendants. The essence of the story is vividly and easily conveyed; the composition is uncluttered, and the final effect is of charm – charmed girl and charmed spectator. It is a rococo spell that is cast. The Psyche story itself is like an allegory of the whole style, with its fairy belief in immortality through love and personal apotheoses finally for all of us. For those who could not get as far as Cupid's palace there was to be supper with Louis XV and another version of the meal served on a *table volant*.

Equally, on a huge scale Giordano could beautifully decorate the religious myth. His *Madonna del Baldacchino* (*Ill. 3*) is a blaze of blue and white, a paean of joy in light and colour which makes the vision something delightfully visionary for the spectator. The baldacchino is held over the Madonna with tremendous panache, and is itself agitated, slightly awry – as if it had caught the excited atmosphere of the picture where angel heads and roses tumble in delight as heaven hovers close to earth. The worshippers are more solidly painted, forming a ring about the central brightness of the actual vision. Giordano's world has somehow banished death and made age picturesque; the majority of its inhabitants are blonde and smiling, dressed in pale colours and each moving in an aura of luminosity – as if motes in the white radiance of eternity. Such pictures are like great windows of glass erected where previously there were walls; nothing in them is too substantial in form, nor in colouring, and for all their virtuoso tricks they are seldom mechanical or dull. It no longer matters whether Giordano actually enjoyed painting them; it is enough that he conveys a sense of enjoyment that might be emulated, but seldom achieved, by the rococo decorators who followed him. Perhaps no French eighteenth-century painter, not at least until Fragonard, dared to let spontaneity bubble from his brush in this way – or dared to trust his talent so far. It is this basic confidence that is Giordano's final message to the rococo style he had done so much to create; Tiepolo alone was successfully to take up the full challenge and achieve something finer.



9 Luca Giordano *Psyche Feasting*

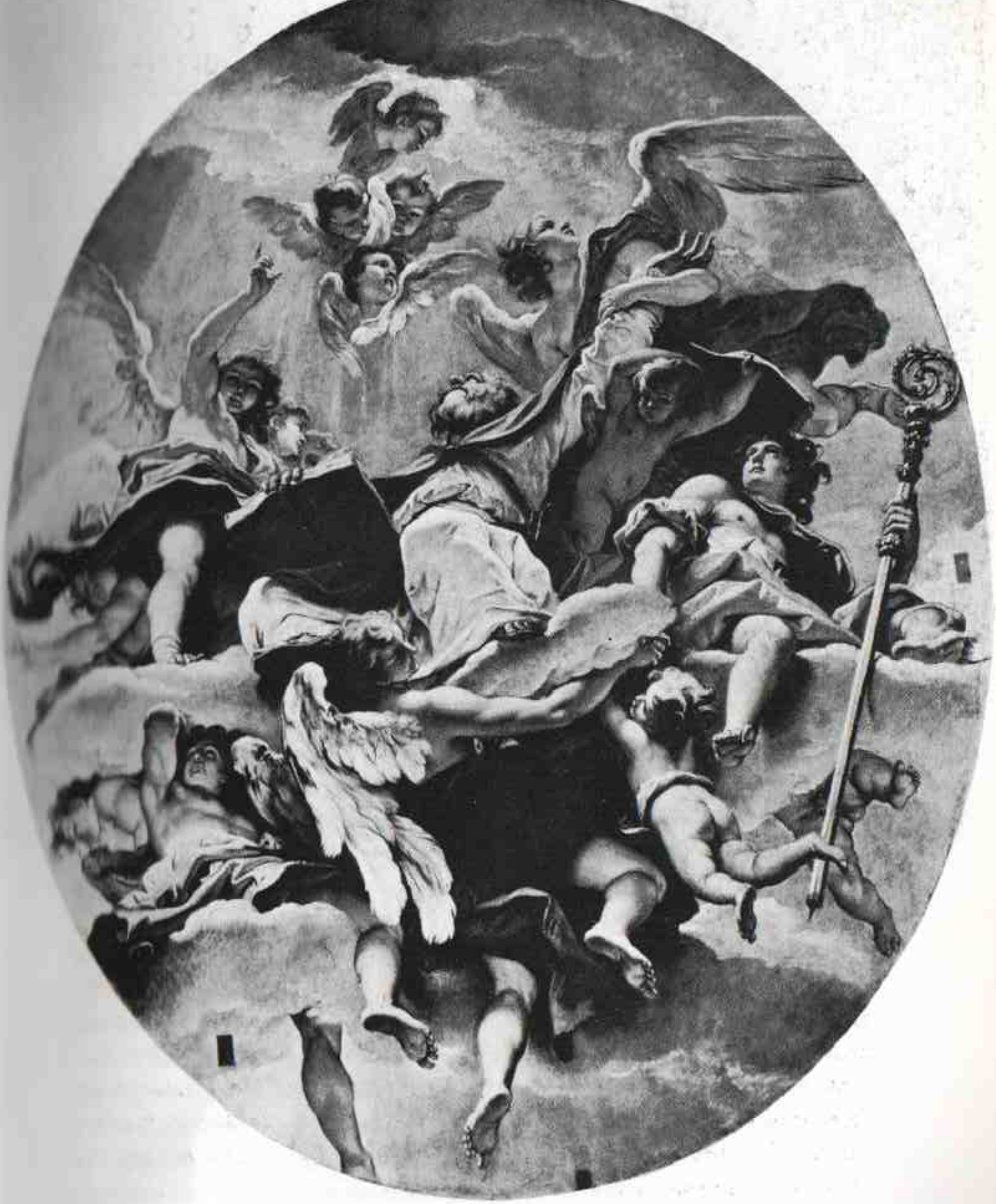
When Giordano died in 1705, the rococo was poised ready to pervade all Europe. If Germany and England had nothing to contribute artistically, they could provide, did provide, splendid opportunities for foreign decorative painters. Nor of course is it true of Germany that it had nothing to contribute; though its marvellous rococo architecture and sculpture cannot be discussed here, they are



10 Valerio Castello *The Finding of Moses*

perhaps the best proof that there *was* a rococo movement. There is no need of definition before the perfect spectacle of the Amalienburg at Nymphenburg. France may have played its part in the style, but architecturally it could produce nothing to rival that beauty.

But in painting the tissue of the rococo style was woven in France and Italy and then exported elsewhere. Giordano is remarkably behind so much: naturally sparking off at Venice a whole group of painters but equally to leave behind in Spain hints for the young Goya in, for example, the brilliant frescoes of San Antonio de los Portugeses at Madrid. Other more completely *seicento* figures were to anticipate rococo elegance, indebted rather to Van Dyck than to Rubens, orientated more towards Correggio than Veronese. The pictures and frescoes of the Genoese painter Valerio Castello (1624–59, *Ill. 10*) are the quintessence of this delicate manner, with swaying, cloudy forms and highly individual, almost flicked-on pigment which look forward particularly to the Guardi (*Ills 67–71*) and Pittoni.

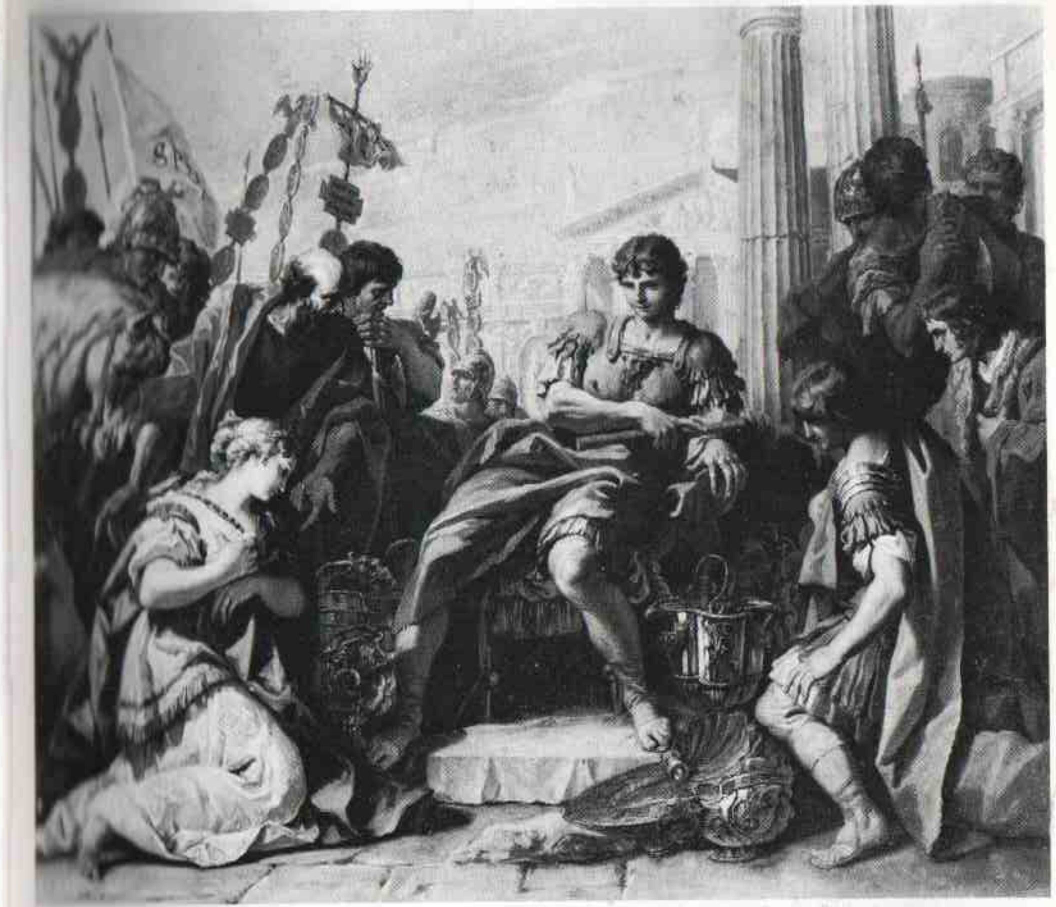


11 Sebastiano Ricci *Apotheosis of S. Marziale*

In saying France and Italy one means, as the eighteenth century opens, Paris and Venice in a quite special way. The two cities were in close artistic contact, made exciting by the abrupt renaissance of native Venetian painting after a dreary period, but the contact does not mean that there were not great differences of style. Interaction was not mutual, for while Paris welcomed and employed Rosalba Carriera, Pellegrini, Sebastiano Ricci – those heirs of Correggio and Veronese – Venice offered scarcely any employment to visiting French artists, and French art exercised only a faint influence on one or two exceptional pictures. Their different interpretations of the rococo are made patent in the differences between Boucher and Tiepolo, accentuated of course by the different demands of patronage.

Venice naturally stood closer to the sixteenth and seventeenth century inheritance. It had possessed Veronese and felt no need for, and not much interest in, Rubens. Out of an Italian tradition, and with the help of Giordano, a specific Venetian style had been created before Giordano's death by Sebastiano Ricci (1659–1734). The decorations for the ceiling of S. Marziale at Venice reveal Ricci's ability to draw the spectator into a new and exciting heaven. The ascent of S. Marziale (*Ill. 11*) is designed to give an almost dizzy spiralling effect. The saint himself is compacted into being hardly more than a knee, a piece of tilted head and that long, dislocated, uplifted arm so ardently clasped by an angel. Like the saint, the spectator goes for a ride in space, sucked up into this complex whorl of swirling but carefully organized shapes. Depth is emphasized by the dramatic pattern of light and shade, increasing the deeply-cut *sotto in sù* effect. The rococo shares its mood, exhilarating but not annihilating. And to stumble on Ricci's ceiling in the otherwise uninteresting church is to experience this mood quite spontaneously, to be agreeably jolted out of reality.

So many eighteenth-century themes, though not originating with Ricci, are given currency by him and set on the path of popularity. In some ways he is like Handel in his ever-recognizable style, his monotony, his stiffness when contrasted with later developments in the century. Something in both men is always reminding one that they were born in the seventeenth century; there is something more vigorous than elegant in their art, and a touch of simplicity which is more enchanting in the composer than in the painter. Yet pictures like the *Continence of Scipio* (*Ill. 12*) are already blends of Veronese and the new century's interests. It is almost a scene from opera, with the basic theme of clemency which had been Veronese's in the *Family of Darius*. Scipio sits like a judge, a tender-hearted one, between the uninteresting fiancé on the right and the brilliantly-clad blonde heroine on the left – a heroine who actually does nothing heroic but merely touches the emotions as she waits hopefully. Scipio overcomes his baser passions and hands her back to her fiancé; virtue conquers love, and morality triumphs. Although Scipio takes a central place, interest concentrates on the heroine, sole woman and very much *prima donna*, dressed in Giordanesque white and gold and blue. There is a seriousness in Ricci's still static composition – operatically very much conceived in a series of solo arias without the complexity of *ensembles* – which is made quite explicit when it is compared with the treatment by François Le Moyne (1688–1737) of the same subject some twenty years later (*Ill. 13*).



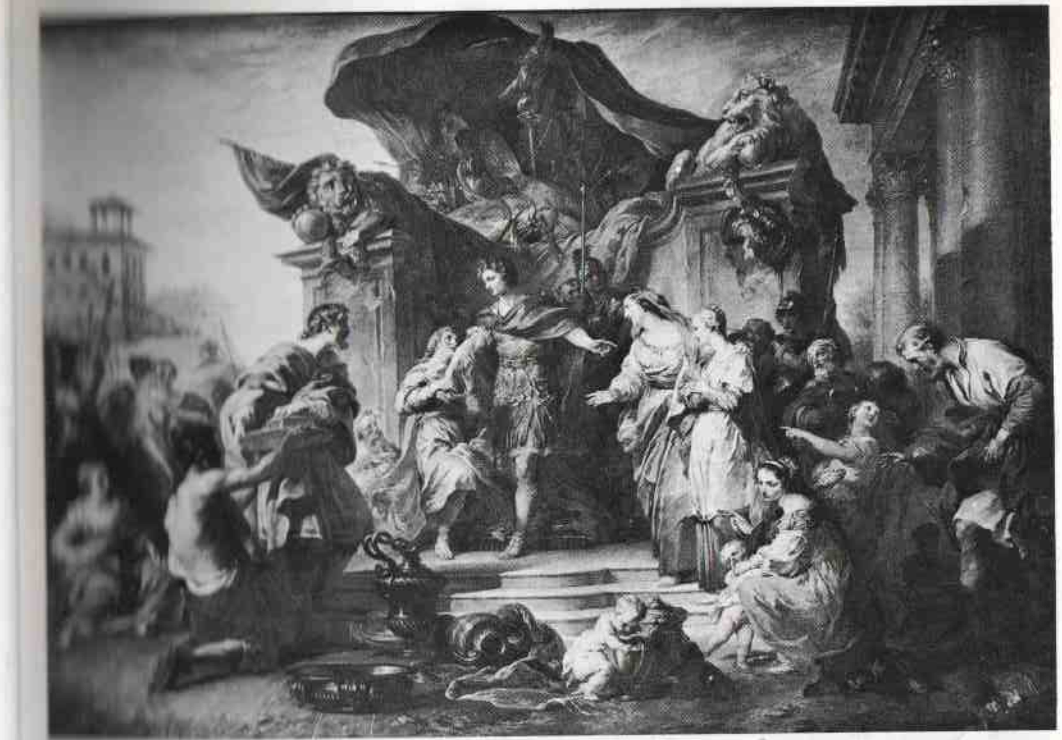
12 SEBASTIANO RICCI *The Continence of Scipio*

This is rococo in movement, almost nervously so, and less solemn as well as less static. Le Moyne has failed to convey the effect of isolating the girl among warriors, and the scene is alive with a positive chorus of girls and mothers and playful children. So promiscuously feminine is the atmosphere that Scipio himself seems to have lost virility; tall as a castrato, he looks oddly ambiguous and *en travesti* in martial armour. A somewhat exaggerated emotionalism agitates the crowded scene – summed up in the intendedly affecting embrace given by the girl's fiancé to Scipio – and the crouching group of mother and child at the right anticipates Greuze. To French eyes Ricci was soon to seem rather bloodless and uninspired, heavy in colour and handling of paint, and too obviously in Veronese's debt. Le Moyne cannot be accused of those faults, indebted though he was to Venetian art. In sheer competence, invention, draughtsmanship, he is Ricci's superior. His picture is typically French, typically of its century – even to the presence of classical draperies (so much less particularized than Ricci's) in a rococo picture. It aims at prettiness rather too patently; and in its determination not to be dull it falls into a triviality which was to prove typical of the eighteenth-century French history picture.

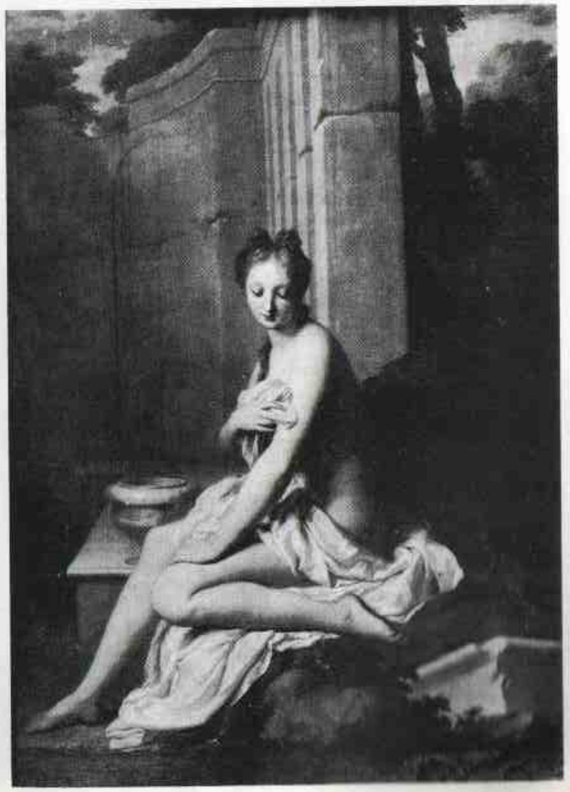
Ricci's later work was to capture a more rococo rhythm and to show, perhaps under the influence of Pellegrini, a livelier handling of actual paint. Although able as a decorator of large surfaces, he was more refreshing on the small scale which was becoming popular through new interest in collecting sketches and *modelli*. Ricci himself wrote that these were really the artist's originals – Diderot was to say much the same thing – and his late *modello* of *S. Helena finding the True Cross* (*Ill. 15*) has an excitement of surface, with paint splintering under the impact of light, which suits its triumphant subject. It is, of course, a miracle. The tall Cross serves, like some holy lightning conductor, to connect heaven and earth: wrapped about at the top by angels and held by a mortal below. It is a triumphant moment rather than a 'human' one; Ricci remains unpsychological and unemotional, but these negatives in fact help him to create a perfectly acceptable idiom for rococo religious art – the most difficult problem faced by the period. Glory and excitement serve him instead, and the *S. Helena* continues the tradition of Giordano.

In France, religious pictures were to fall into a confused welter of insipid piety and misguided prettiness which was to lead to adverse comment even at the time.

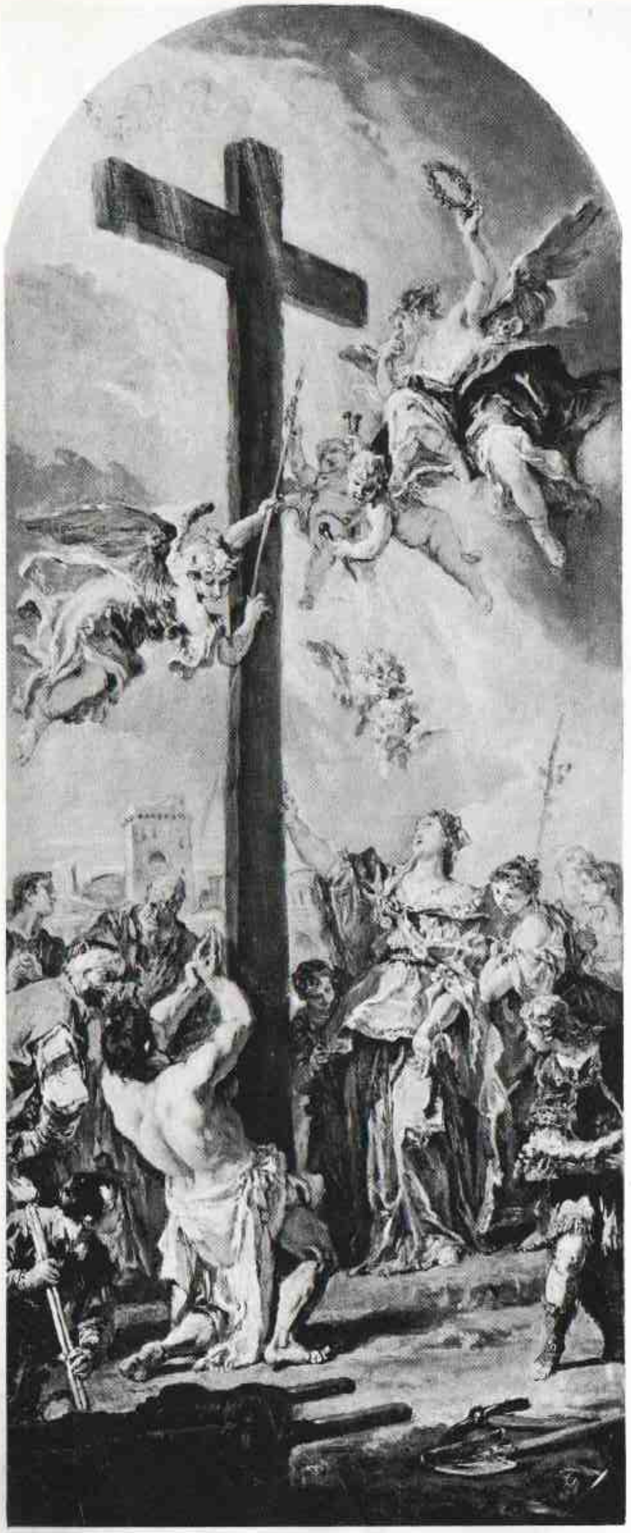
As early as 1704 the *Susanna at the Bath* (*Ill. 14*) of Jean Santerre (1658–1717) reveals an almost disturbing eroticism and something of that peculiarly chilly



13 FRANÇOIS LE MOYNE
The Continence of Scipio



14 JEAN-BAPTISTE SANTERRE
Susanna at the Bath

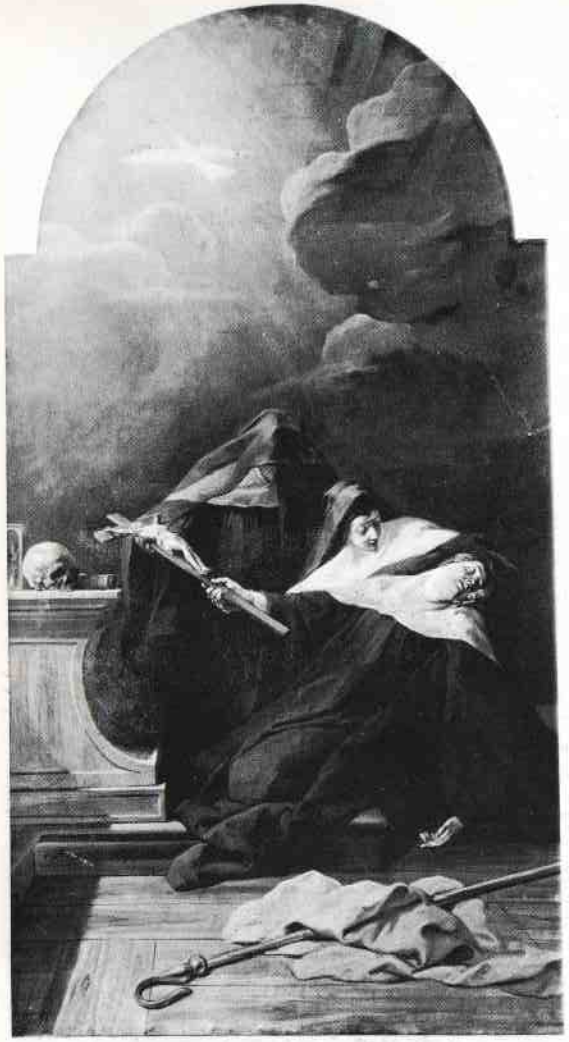


15 Sebastiano Ricci
S. Helena finding the True Cross

rococo quality which is to be found in Falconet's nude statuettes. Few comparable pictures were to be produced at Venice, whereas Santerre initiates a whole troop of *baigneuses* who go on dabbling with the erotic possibilities of water as late as Fragonard, all seeming ultimately to derive from Correggio's *Leda*. And out of this revolution was to come the achievement of Boucher as well as Fragonard.

While Venice continued to emphasise the traditional, Paris was eager to make a break with the anyway immediate past. The political conservatism of Venice tinged its art; the highest compliment paid to Tiepolo was to say he was another Veronese. But Boucher was not thought to be, nor was he, like any figure of the past. Even if France had wished to stand still as the eighteenth century advanced, it was impossible for the country to do so. The death of Louis XIV in 1715, the Regency, the emergent character of Louis XV and the consequent reign of Madame de Pompadour: these were events which marked the evolution of the century, proclaiming that time passes. The most successful painting in eighteenth-century France was not that which evoked the baroque but that which, sometimes without realizing it, revolted against the past. It is a good symbol, even if not strictly true, that the pupils of Boucher should be said to have thrown bread pellets at the pictures of Le Brun. The whole duty of the rococo there was to release art from being the carrier of preconceptions; it need not contain a religious message, nor a moral one, and ultimately need not be serious at all. The disturbing quality in Santerre's picture, which remains remarkable at its early date, is that it ostensibly continues to serve religion while implying a belief in very different values. Perhaps in the case of Susanna this hardly matters; Santerre's *S. Theresa*, however, painted a few years later for the chapel at Versailles, created a scandal owing to its erotic nature. The majority of French religious pictures of the period hardly create that, inhibited perhaps partly by fear of being too frank, or of being thought absurd. The century could not deny its inherent preference for pagan rather than Christian religion. An interesting passage in Daniel Webb's *Enquiry into the Beauties of Painting* (1760) states this quite openly; having explained why the subject of S. Andrew about to be martyred causes little emotional response, he goes on: 'We are not so calm at the sacrifice of Iphigenia; beautiful, innocent, and unhappy; we look upon her as the victim of an unjust decree; she might live the object of universal love; she dies the object of universal pity.'

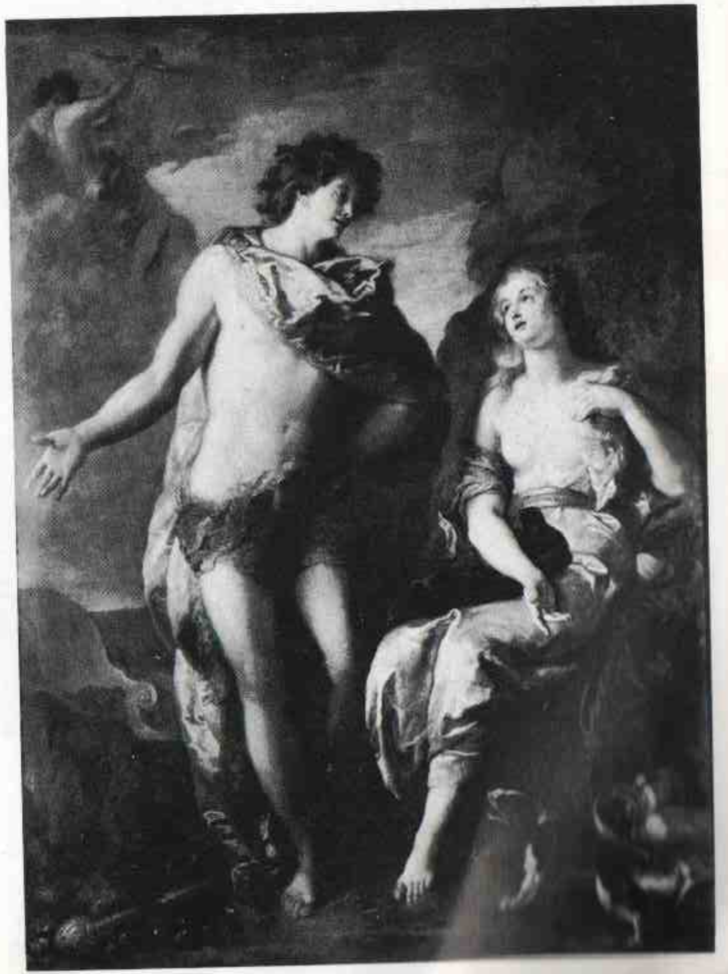
It was indeed a woman's death which inspired one of the few successful French religious pictures painted during the first half of the century: the *Death of*



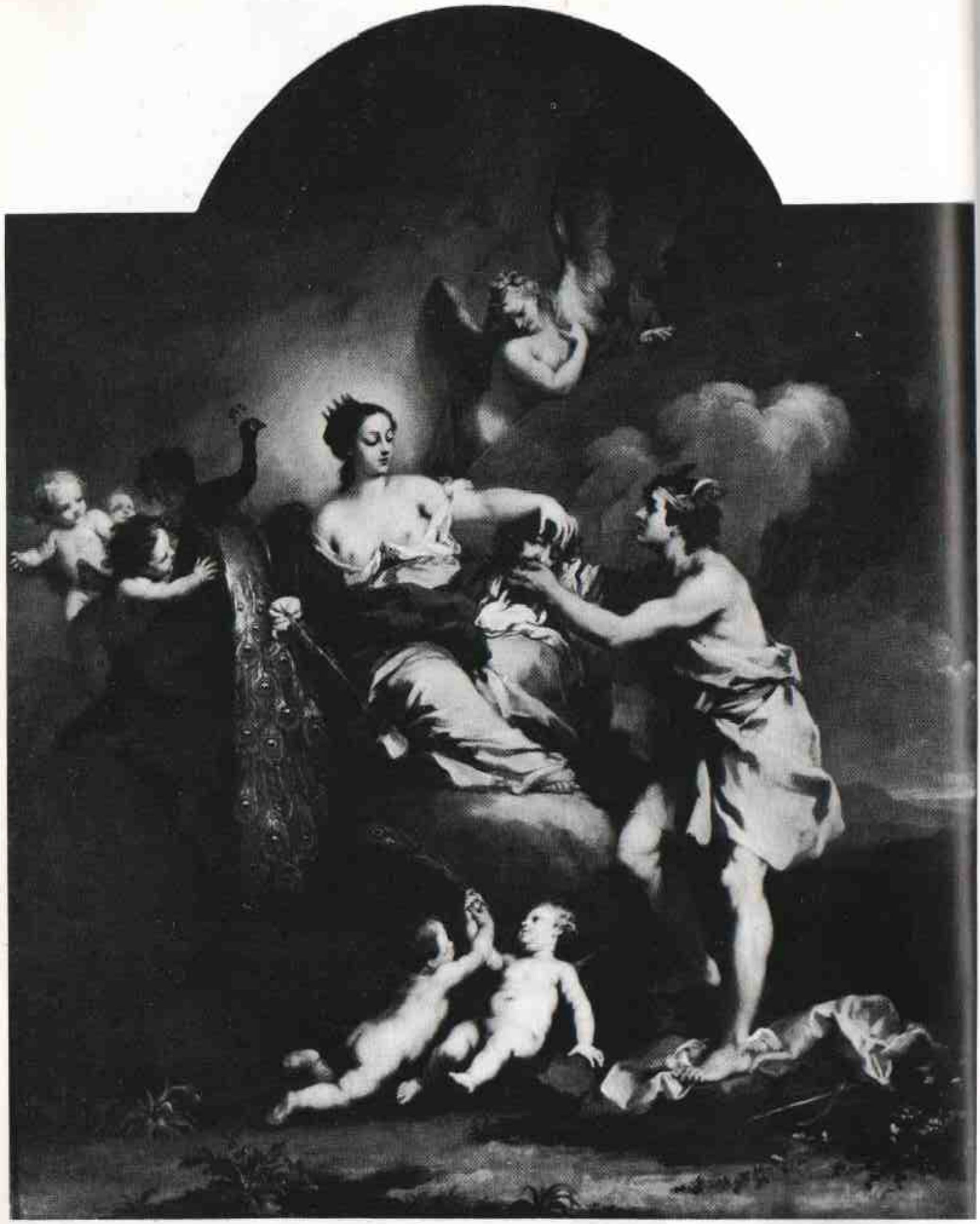
16 Jean Restout
The Death of S. Scholastica

S. Scholastica (1730; *Ill. 16*) by Jean Restout (1692–1768). This is a baroque shock cutting across many preconceptions of the period. Much more obviously 'engaged' than Ricci's art, and much more powerfully emotional than Le Moyne's, Restout's is a highly personal return to the standards of his uncle Jouvenet. The violence of the effect is the more striking because of the economy of means; the three sombre figures, one completely shrouded like some Gothic *pleurant*, are shaken by a drama of sensibility which is restricted, and made poignant, by the bare record of their environment. Nothing mitigates the lonely moment of death: no miracle intervenes, and heaven remains silent.

Restout's picture is an isolated achievement, just as he was an untypical artist. Despite his *memento mori*, the feast went on recklessly. It hardly matters with some painters where they were trained; they were travelling throughout Europe – or sending their pictures in place of themselves. The rococo became fully international. Painters like Jacopo Amigoni (1682–1752) and Charles de La Fosse (1636–1716) are almost bewilderingly peripatetic: Amigoni was at work in London, then Paris, in Germany and finally in Spain, while La Fosse spent a significant period at Venice before returning to Paris and then working in London for some three years. With them the rococo remains solid and earthbound. Their subjects may be the doings of gods and goddesses, and the purpose of their pictures largely decorative, but they are still a little awkward and lacking in anything air-borne or enchanted. La Fosse's agreeable *Bacchus and Ariadne* (*Ill. 17*) is a memory of Venice but handled with a rather slack air; there is not much



17
Charles de La Fosse
Bacchus and Ariadne

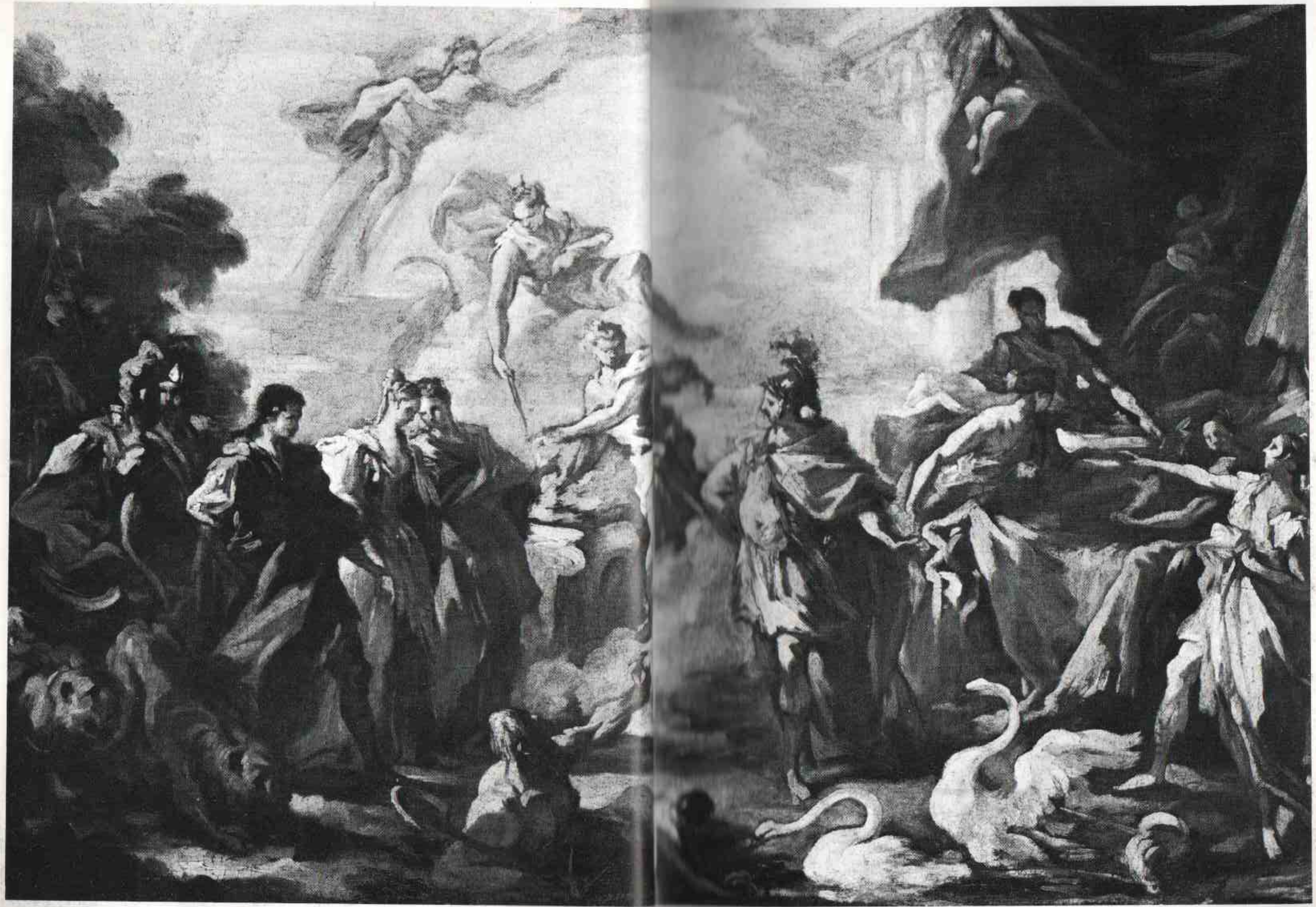


18 JACOPO AMIGONI *Juno and Mercury*

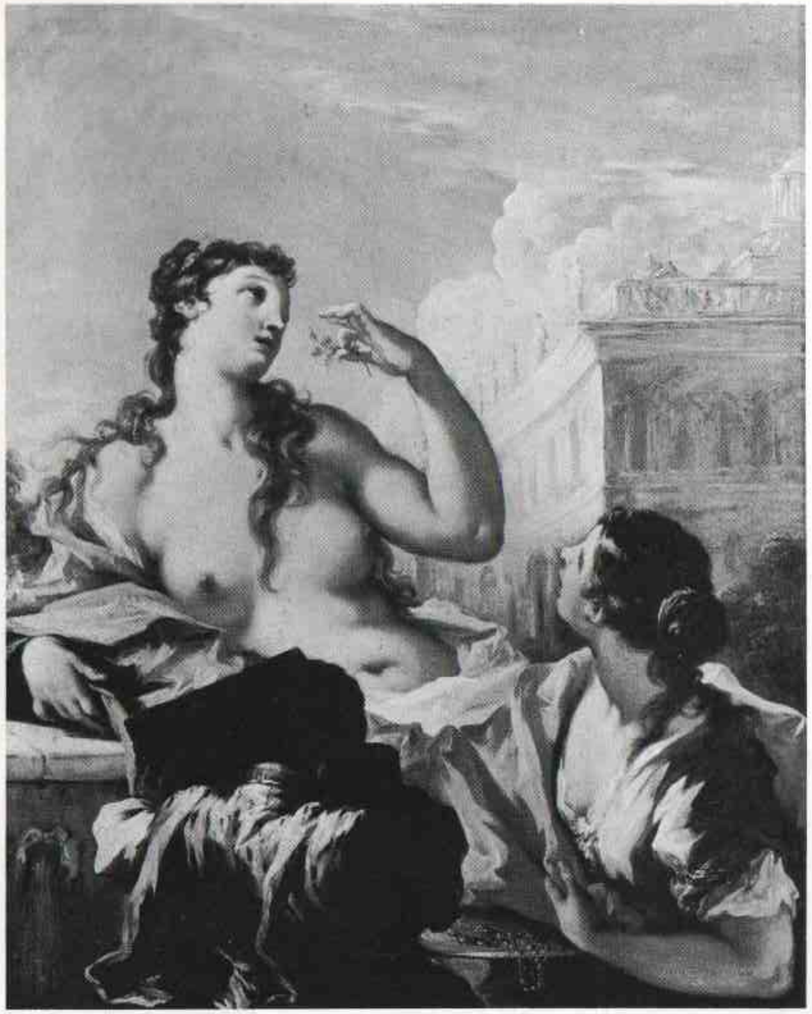
sense of contact between the two figures as they converse quietly – and only the barking spaniel (who has come from Titian's dynamic treatment of the theme) recalls that his mistress's virtue is in danger. La Fosse may have admired Titian, and certainly admired Rubens, but neither could galvanize his tepid talent into any vital action. Amigoni, even at his decorative best, shared this languor which is that of talents overshadowed, possibly bewildered, by the style they had helped to create. *Juno and Mercury* (*Ill. 18*), one of four mythologies painted by Amigoni for Moor Park, remains too little idealized, and faintly ludicrous. Imagination has been less exercised than industry; Amigoni's people are real enough to be commonplace – and to feel somewhat ill at ease when shown sitting on clouds.

The true master of an air-borne, properly rococo manner in which to treat such subjects was Gian Antonio Pellegrini (1675–1741) who worked little in his native Venice but very widely in the rest of Europe. It was he, the brother-in-law of Rosalba, who was commissioned to paint a huge allegorical ceiling in the Banque de France at Paris in 1719, thus bringing the Venetian decorative style forcibly before Parisians. And when the ceiling was completed, its *modello* remained in the same room, as we know from Rosalba's diary of her triumphal French visit immediately afterwards. Thus Pellegrini's large-scale handling and his virtuoso brilliance in the sketch were proclaimed together. It is in sketches, in fact, that Pellegrini is at his most confident and most spontaneous. His sketch for the *Allegory of the Elector Palatine's Marriage* (*Ill. 19*), another preparatory work for a large-scale commission, this time a German one, is virtuoso in its jagged, excited brushwork and its improvised but effective forms. Everything is faintly irridescent, bubble-blown, run up out of a few twists of silk and some feathers, but with an assurance which is itself attractive, and an economy of detail that delights the eye. Le Moyne, and most French rococo artists, left too little to the imagination; their competence showed itself in resolute recording of everything, and even their sketches are seldom as rapidly improvised, as full of suggestions, as are Pellegrini's.

Pellegrini probably never seemed an important painter to his contemporaries, and it is only very recently that he has attracted the attention he deserves – deserves as an artist, not merely because he is a link between Giordano and the Guardi brothers or helped to disseminate the rococo style throughout Europe. His range of pastel colours and his lively, calligraphic brushwork give his work much more freshness than Ricci's; he moves over surfaces with an effect of wit, cutting the corners so that we quickly arrive at comprehension of the shapes he is painting; once he has placed them, he passes on. In his world nothing is very



19 Gian Antonio Pellegrini *Allegory of the Elector Palatine's Marriage*

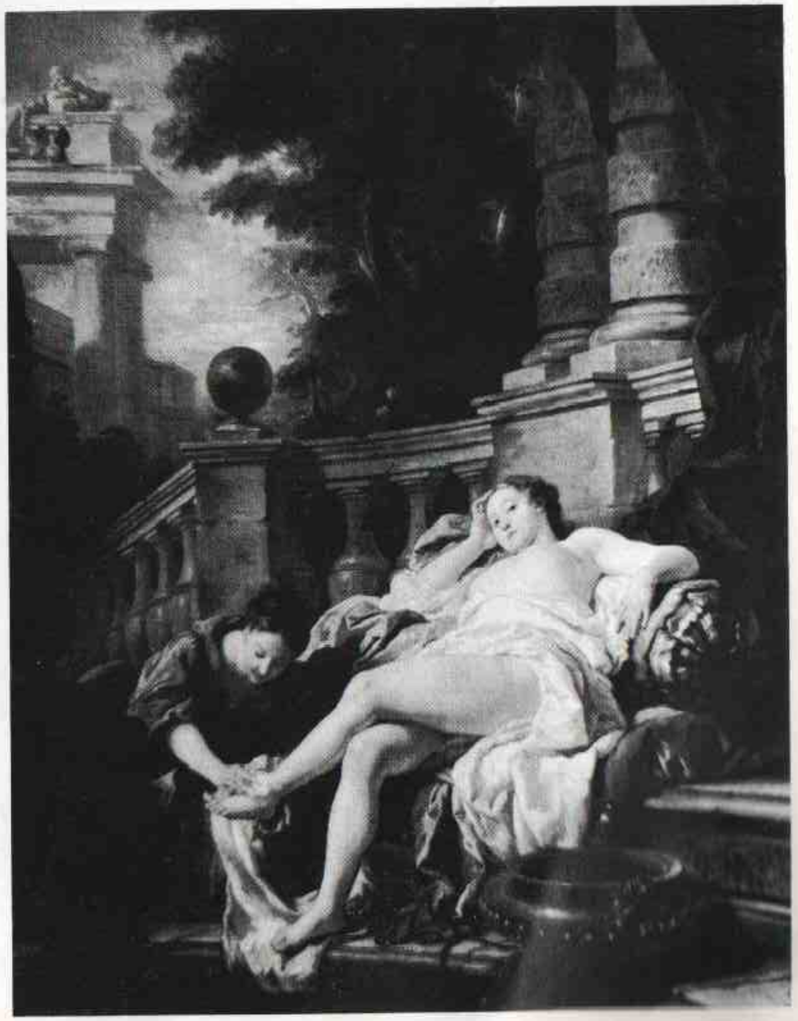


20 Gian Antonio Pellegrini *Bathsheba*

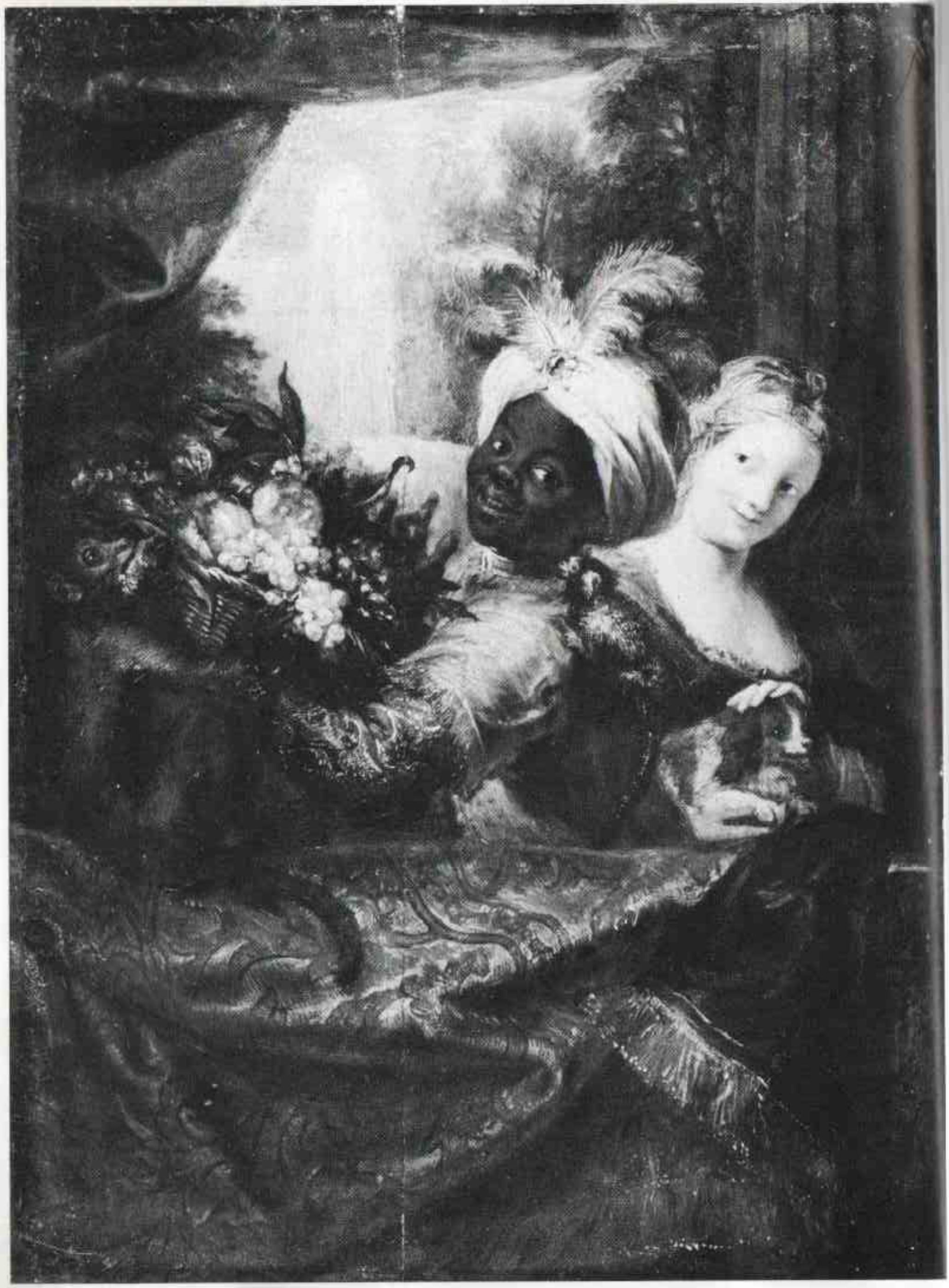
solemn, or solid, but it beautifully fulfils its function. There is even a sort of innocence about his *Bathsheba* (*Ill. 20*) who ogles the distant king high up on the balustrade of a flimsy Palladian palace. It seems a simple piece of typical Pellegrini decoration, markedly so when compared to the not very much later boudoir *Bathsheba* (*Ill. 21*) of Jean-François Detroy (1679–1752). This is more organized into being a composition, a complete *baignade* in which Bathsheba voluptuously reclines, displaying a generous expanse of thigh. It equally well fulfils its function, a more sophisticated one. Where Pellegrini is dreaming of

hardly more than some decorative patches of flesh-coloured and blue and white paint – textures being largely undifferentiated – Detroy aims to record real women's bodies and to place them in relation to each other and to their setting. It is no accident that he was a brilliant painter of genre; only the clothes in his picture here separate it from some *Déclaration de l'amour*, at once witty, topical, and preoccupied by the theme of love.

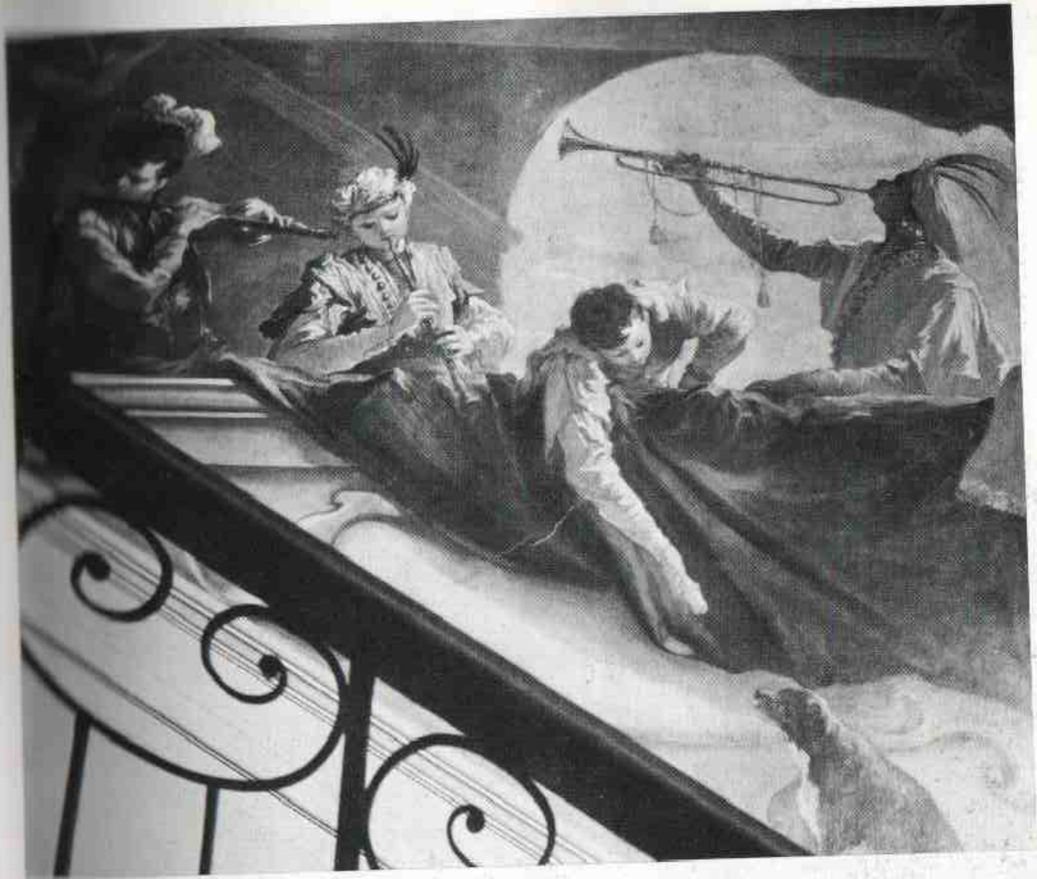
It was this sort of gallantry that was so lacking from Venetian rococo; even where lip-service was paid to the cult of women and love, it remained a matter largely of the lips. It is almost significant that Pellegrini's Bathsheba stops at the waist, dissolving thence onwards into a few folds of light drapery. At times the



21
Jean-François
Detroy
Bathsheba

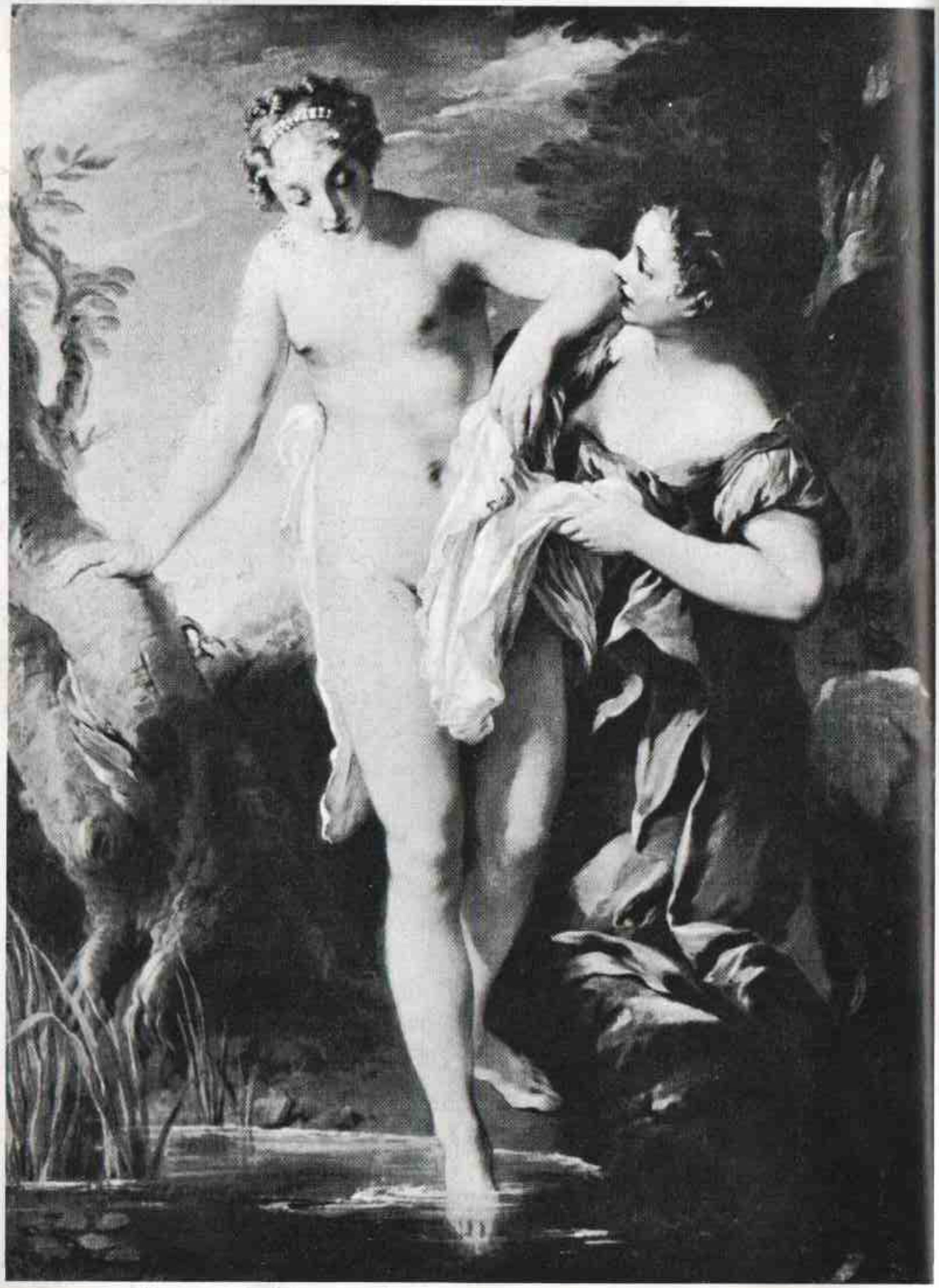


22 ANTOINE COYPEL *Negro with Fruit*

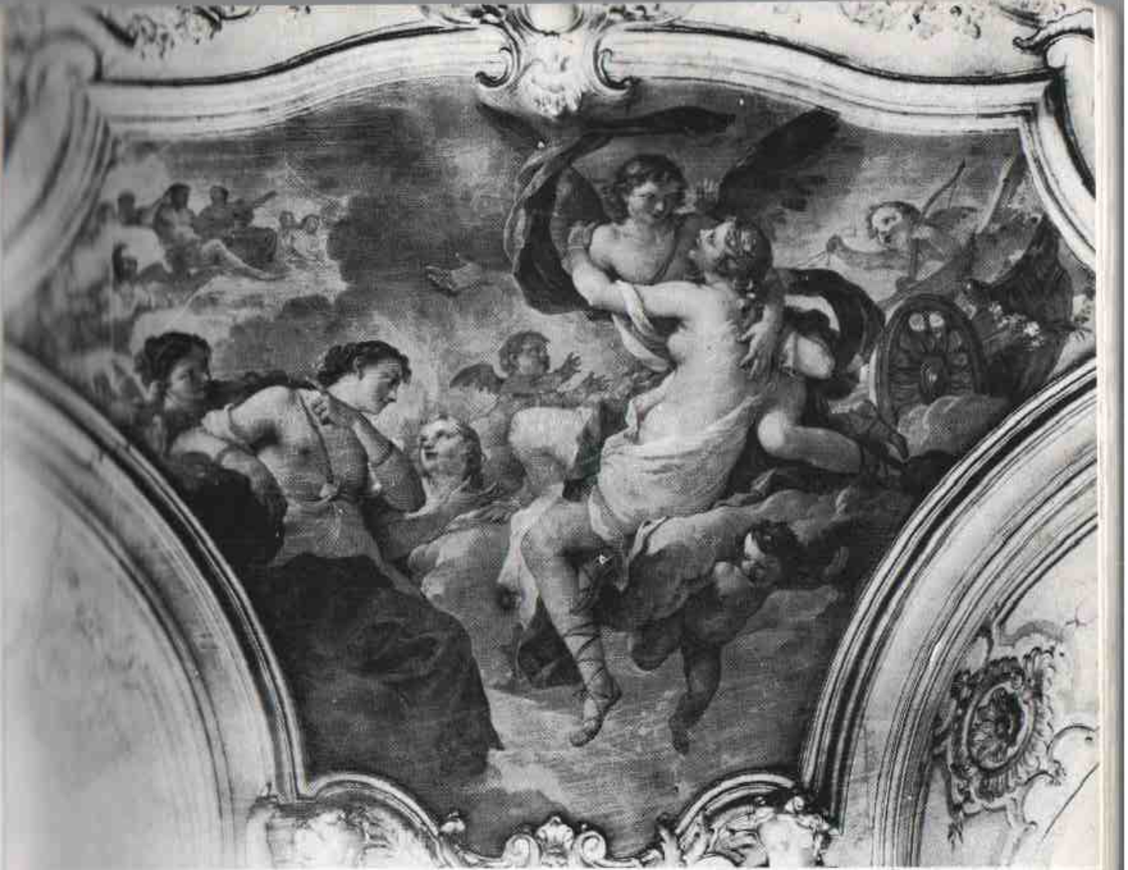


23 GIAN ANTONIO PELLEGRINI *Musicians*

two cultures could draw very close – not often as close as are Pellegrini's *Musicians* (*Ill. 23*) to the *Negro with Fruit* (*Ill. 22*) by Antoine Coypel (1661–1722). Even here, a graceful, beguiling female presence engages the spectator's attention, and the girl and Negro relate outwards, establishing an actuality that Pellegrini is not concerned with conveying. While Venetian painters continued to give serious attention to the more traditional themes of love and duty, French artists were dispensing with the aspect of duty and a rococo genre was evolving, well represented by Le Moyne's *Baigneuse* (*Ill. 24*), a version of which was publicly exhibited at the Salon of 1725. A leading painter of the day, younger than La Fosse and much more important than Antoine Coypel, the teacher of Boucher (as might be guessed) and finally *premier peintre du roi*, Le Moyne here asserts the



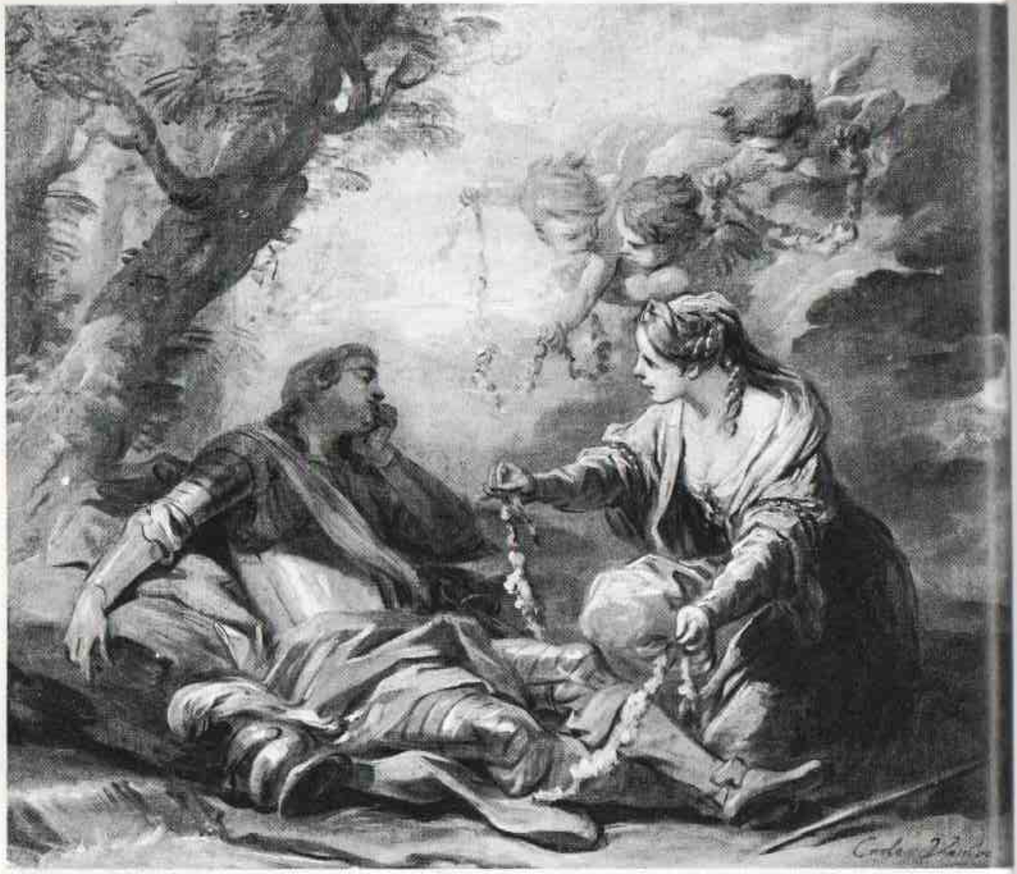
24 François Le Moyne *Baigneuse*



25 Charles Natoire *Cupid and Psyche*

new, almost frivolous, freedom. There is no longer any need to call his nude by an Old Testament name; she steps forward simply as a bather, exploring the *frisson* to be derived from the suggested contact of flesh and water.

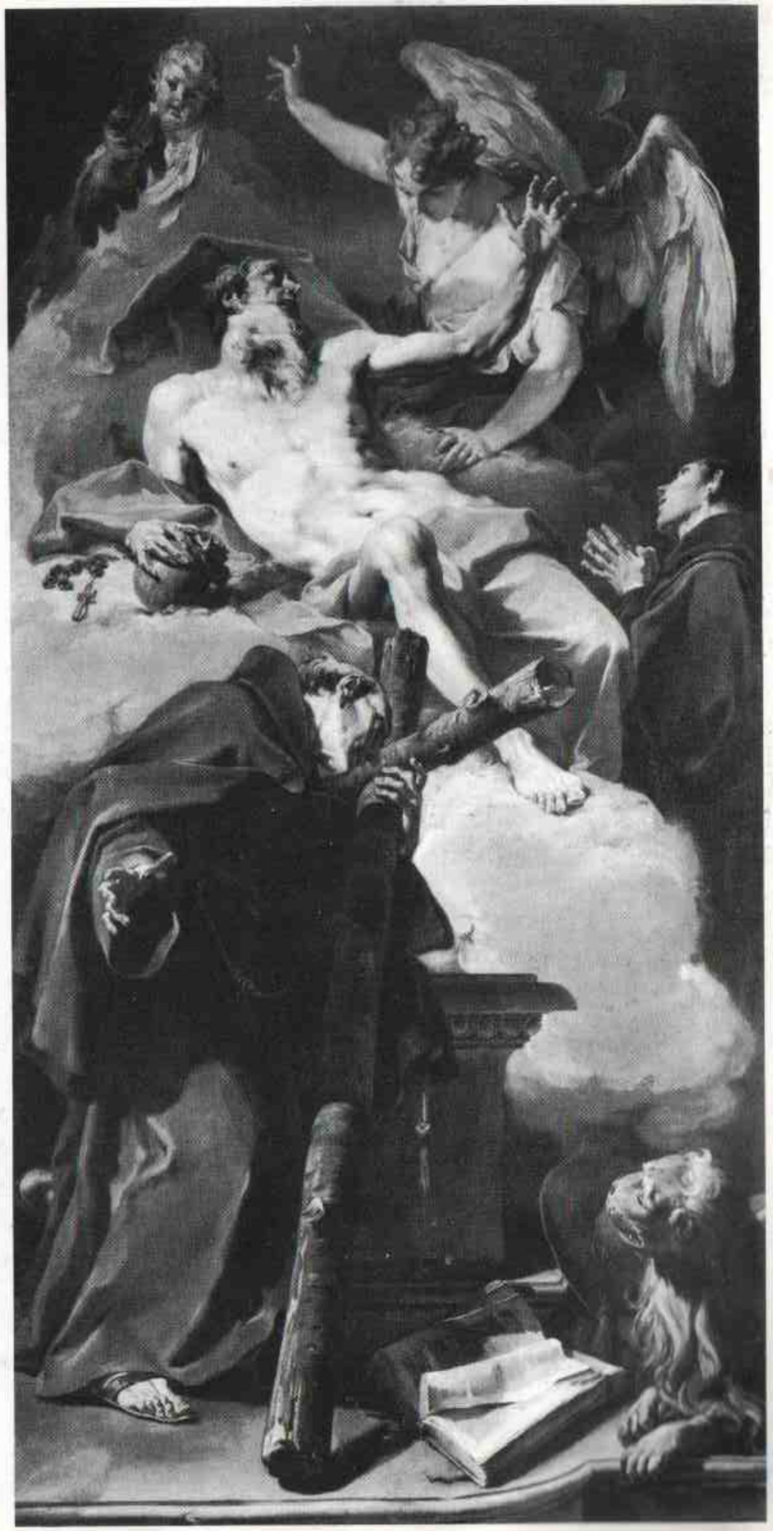
Le Moyne's own career was abruptly cut short by suicide in 1737; Pellegrini was to die four years later. Their deaths do not mark the end of the rococo movement but they signal the end of its first, perhaps finest, flowering. The high art of Boucher and Tiepolo had many years yet to run, and the variations to be produced by Fragonard and the Guardi had not yet evolved. Apart from all these the rococo was not exhausted and its practitioners continued with a style that was to grow out of date, sometimes to lose its savour in their own work, during their lifetimes. Whatever other new currents disturbed the century, there remained a demand which was to be satisfied in France by Charles Natoire (1700–77) and Carle van Loo (1705–65) – the latter one of those painters



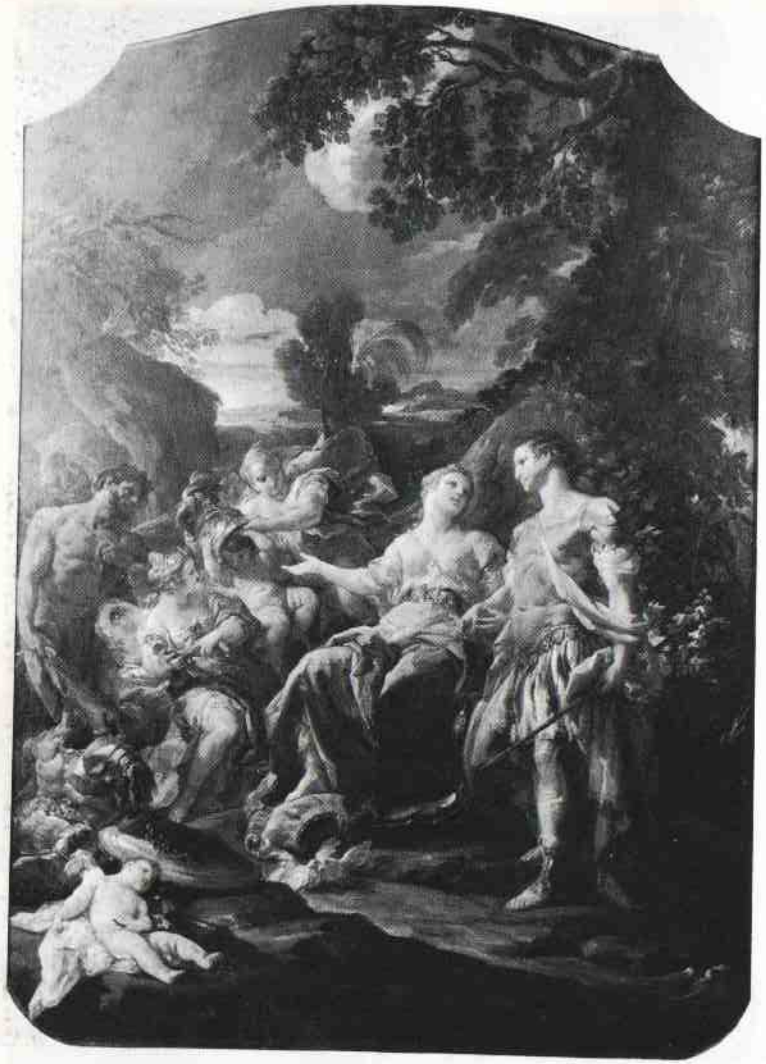
26 CARLE VAN LOO *Rinaldo and Armida*

whose contemporary reputation was inexplicably high. It is a general style in which such painters work. Natoire's re-telling of the Cupid and Psyche story (*Ill. 25*) is helped by its gilded setting at the Hôtel de Soubise. Van Loo is more tolerable in sketches than in his large-scale, dully-handled, insipid pictures; and a last sigh of rococo grace can be detected in the *Rinaldo and Armida* (*Ill. 26*).

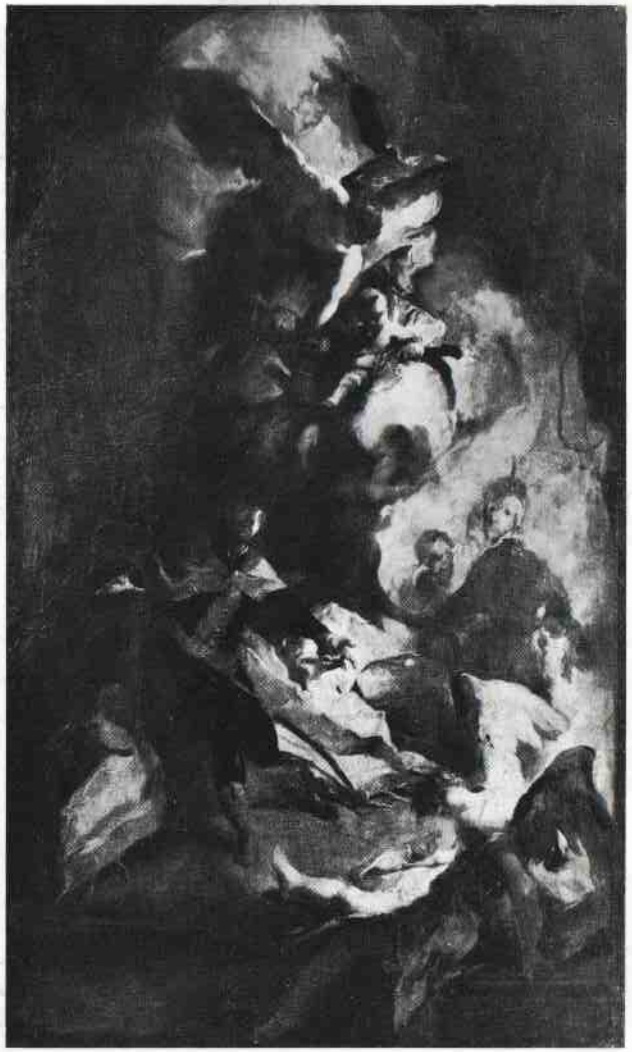
By the side of these painters, Italy continued to show more variety and vitality. In Venice Giambattista Pittoni (1687–1767) worked in a sweetened decorative style that proved popular outside the city as well. He was also capable of unexpected spurts of vigour, of changing his usual formulae and producing something at once effective as decoration and boldly handled. The robust drama of the angel appearing to S. Jerome in Pittoni's *Three Saints* (*Ill. 27*) communicates itself in a spiralling pattern all the way down the composition to the



27
GIAMBATTISTA PITTONI
Three Saints



28 Corrado Giaquinto
Venus presenting Æneas with Armour



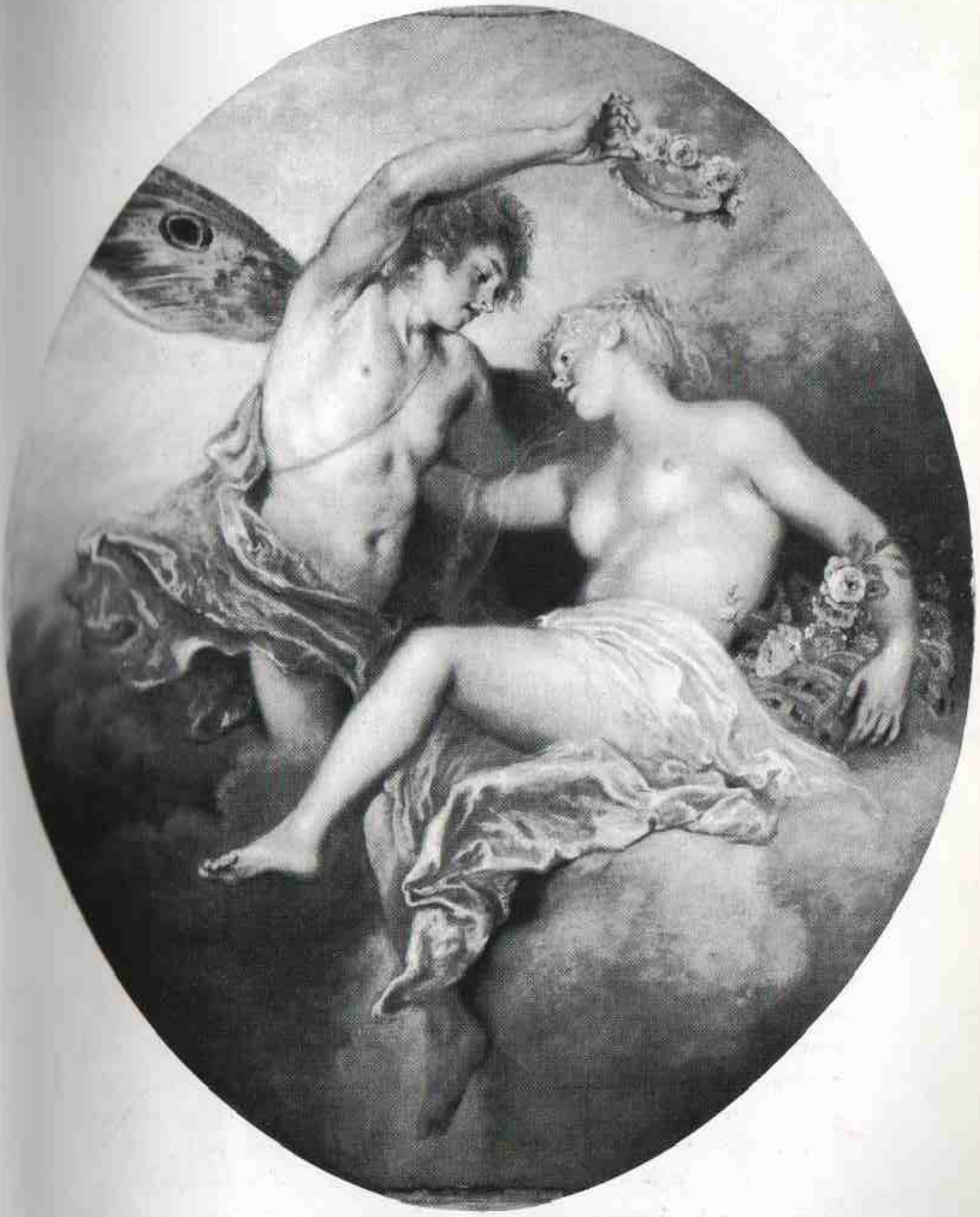
29 Franz Anton Maulbertsch
Glorification of S. Stephen

disturbed book and wary lion at the base. The saint not only receives a vision but seems himself part of a vision, drifting on the long diagonal of cloud before the adoring S. Peter of Alcantara. A more Frenchified rococo quality is apparent in the work of the Neapolitan Corrado Giaquinto (1703–65) who succeeded Amigoni as court painter in Madrid and who was to exercise considerable influence on the young Goya. His very individual tonality, with sea-greens and greys and touches of coral-colour, is part of the complex circumstances of his formation, and the Parisian sophistication of *Venus presenting Æneas with Armour* (*Ill. 28*) is explicable through his contacts with Claudio Francesco Beaumont at Turin. There the court fostered a rococo manner into which Giaquinto's picture fits: decorative and not too serious, a mingling of Italian and French trends which results in a truly international style. It is playful but highly elegant mythologizing, suited to dealing with classical stories through, as it were, Ariosto's eyes.

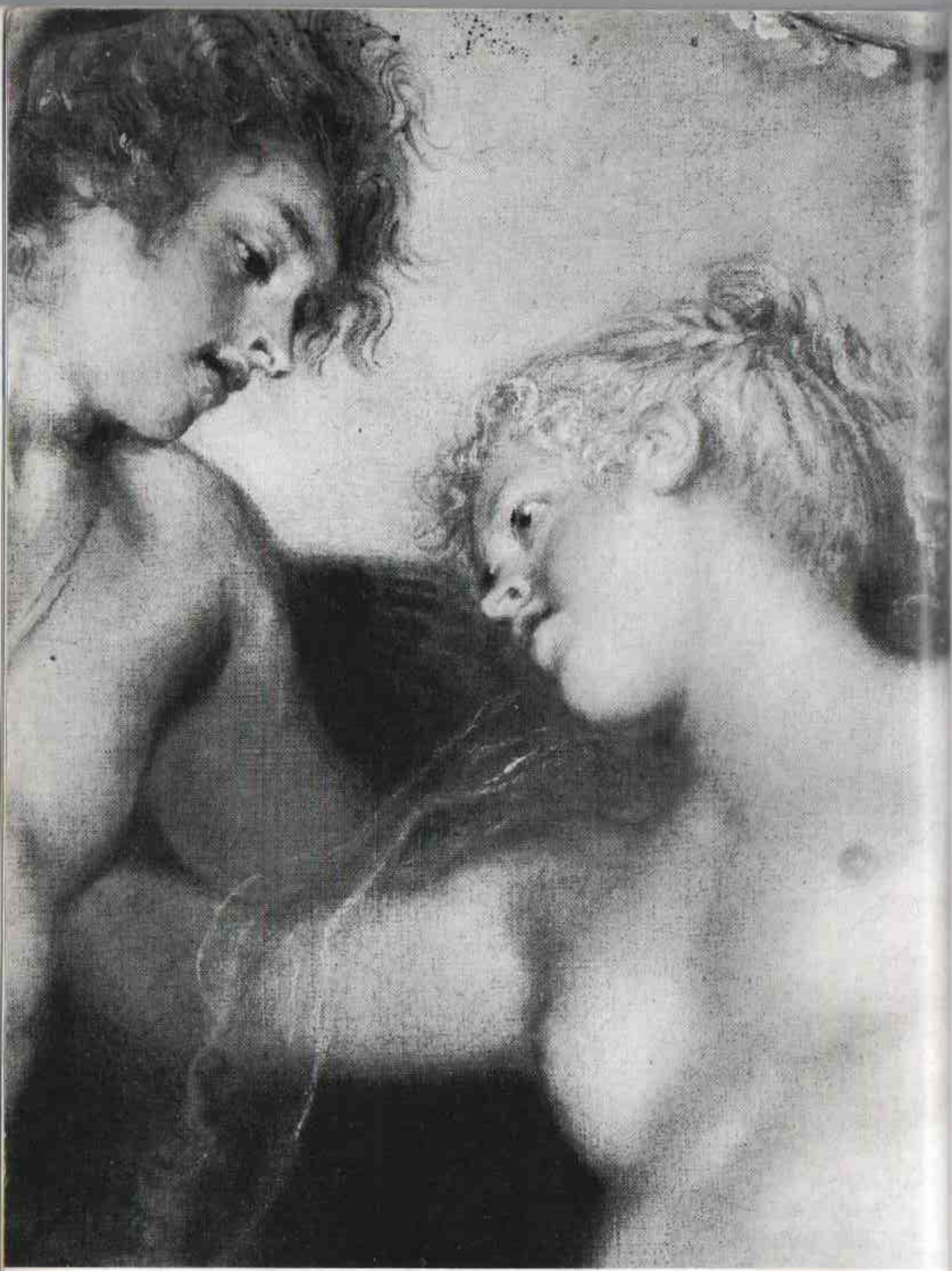
This is the world that, even when still popular at courts, was soon to be under attack for lack of truthfulness, disregard of the classic canons even while relying on history and mythology. It remained very much a Southern European world, centred on those absolutist courts which were themselves soon to be under attack. To some extent, the rococo required a suspension of disbelief which it was hardest to achieve in France; before such critical audiences the spell seldom worked. It is more than a coincidence that there religious pictures were so uninspired and that the best decorative schemes of, for instance, Le Moyne, remain dutiful covering of space in a basically monotonous way. When the rococo produced one last, unexpected and original flash it was in Austria, with the work of Franz Anton Maulbertsch (1724–96) which is almost the pictorial equivalent of some Bavarian, brilliantly-coloured, dazzling church interior. Maulbertsch's complete acceptance of the Catholic religion is expressed in excited visions (*Ill. 29*) with swooning mists of colour, like clouds of tinted incense. Dissolving forms and phosphorescent colour are used to beguile us into believing what we see – and we do believe it, thanks to the power of art. Beyond Maulbertsch there could be no development for the rococo; indeed, it was he who had kept the style in existence long after it had elsewhere succumbed.

In its haste to be decorative and light-hearted, the rococo had perhaps gone too far in its disengagement from reality – psychological as much as physical reality. It had no proper reply to the attacks on its frivolity, its mannered grace, its lack of moral purpose. It never in fact replied to attacks because the articulate parties were all in opposition to it. But without fully realizing it, it did possess the perfect answer to attack. The paintings of Watteau reveal that a decorative ideal need not forbid a profound sense of psychology and a response to humanity. Watteau 'arrived' as a personality on the artistic scene at Paris in the last years of La Fosse's life, just before Pellegrini began the Banque de France ceiling. Like these, and so many other rococo painters, Watteau was commissioned to paint decorative mythological pictures. His *Spring* (*Ill. 30*), one of a set of four for Crozat's dining-room, is an example of this type of work, not most typical of his genius. Yet it manages to be elegant and decorative with no refining away of humanity. His Zephyr and Flora are in contact, wonderfully, erotically, aware of each other. The graceful form is complemented by serious content. The two bodies are natural; they possess blood pulsing under the skin, vitality that flares their nostrils and sets their eyes sparkling (*Ill. 31*). Before this sheer jet of *joie de vivre*, much rococo decoration turns to soggy cardboard.

The real triumph of *Rubénisme* was that it made – if not Watteau, then Watteau's career, possible. He was not essentially a decorator, was not perhaps rococo at all. But he needed a period of freedom like the early years of the eighteenth century in which, though so briefly, to live and work.



30 JEAN-ANTOINE WATTEAU *Spring*



31 Jean-Antoine Watteau *Spring (detail)*

Chapter Two

The Importance of Watteau

Among the things that the eighteenth century did not understand about Watteau was the extent to which he was a rebel. Or perhaps it suspected this and for that reason was the more eager to accept him and his caprices, to receive him into the Académie Royale, and to include him within its social frame – from which he was always trying to escape. Placed in the early years of the nineteenth century, Watteau, with his aspirations and tart tongue, his evasions and illness, would have seemed one more rebellious, romantic figure. As it was, his contemporaries hardly understood him; and yet, significantly, those close to him felt an urge to put down on paper some description of his unusual character in a manner unprecedented. They at least understood that he was unique, and they certainly appreciated his revolutionary art.

Watteau had no public career, no great commissions from Church or Crown; he seldom executed large-scale pictures; he had no interest in painting historical subjects; the most official patronage he ever received was to produce a *morceau de réception* for the Académie who exceptionally left the subject unspecified (*à sa volonté*) – and even then he delayed the execution for years. Watteau should have been the great neglected genius of his age; but to its credit, he was a great applauded genius – appreciated, almost loved, far outside France. And outside France he was, perhaps, better understood. That he should have been so successful as an artist, where one might have expected non-comprehension if not active disapproval, shows how directly he spoke to the age. He was its poet, and he gave it an image in which it would have liked to believe.

There is something very moving in the international aspect of Watteau's fame. It crystallizes all the internationalism of the century. In France Watteau had some devoted patrons and friends. It was in an Italian dictionary that the first biography of him was printed, during his brief lifetime. In Germany Frederick the Great (born in the year of Watteau's first public success) collected what remains unrivalled as the finest and most extensive group of his pictures. And England from the first responded to his art – during his lifetime and continuously thereafter. Reynolds and Gainsborough were united in admiration of him. Gainsborough borrowed from Watteau's compositions and inherited something of his felicity. Reynolds, so little given to enthusiasm or gush, went so far as to say: 'Watteau is a master I adore.'

The importance of Watteau was twofold. He created, unwittingly, the concept of the individualistic artist loyal to himself, and alone. When the well-meaning but basically uncomprehending Caylus – himself the narrator of this story – gave him a long sermon on his fecklessness and failure to look at the future, Watteau replied with Baudelairian logic: '*le pis-aller, n'est-ce pas l'hôpital? On n'y refuse personne*.' With this almost desperate sense of isolation there went for Watteau (just as for Baudelaire) a natural longing to rid himself of loneliness, to find some person or group to whom he could belong. His obsession in art with love is not merely the fashion of the moment. Everyone senses a seriousness in his pictures, an intensity under the elegance. Probably it is now possible, with new understanding of Mozart and Pope, to understand that sincerity in art does not have to be uncouth, and that perfection of form does not mean poverty of content.

The freedom that Watteau's life tragically achieved – having dodged obligations, changed his lodgings so often, escaped the importunity of friends, to slip out of life prematurely – was achieved without tragedy in his pictures. More important than any concept of the artist was the art he created. He invented in effect a new category of picture, the *fête galante*, which claimed complete freedom of subject-matter for the painter and which at the same time, while dispensing with overt 'story', treated human nature as psychologically as the novel was to do. *Fête* is only half his concern; it is given an ambiguous quality by the adjective which can tinge it just flirtatiously or dye it with the colour of deep passion: ripple a satin skirt to reveal a pretty ankle or isolate a pair of lovers in their own intense spell.

The earliest biographers of Watteau give a clue to what united people in their response to his work, and a clue also to what separated it from ordinary rococo decoration. This was his reaction to nature – that key word of the century. There were truths of human nature as well as those of the natural world. The truths that Watteau was concerned with are treated even more explicitly by his close contemporary Marivaux, equally a *modern* and associated with the group who produced the *Nouveau Mercure*. Marivaux was to say of his own work: '*J'ai guetté dans le cœur humain toutes les niches différentes où peut se cacher l'amour*.' The very first biography of Watteau given by Orlandi in 1719 sums the artist up as indefatigable, '*sempre instancabile*', in his study of nature. The obituary notice written by his friend Antoine de La Roque, director of the *Mercure*, defines Watteau as '*exact observateur de la nature*'. This point needs stressing, because it is too easy to see Watteau as a frail, pale figure, wandered out of his century. If he is a poet, it is one akin to Pope rather than to Keats.

Watteau's art offers the first great alternative to the rococo – offering it during the very years the rococo was uncurling its decorative fronds. Almost under cover of that style Watteau comes forward, first as decorator, then as creator of *fêtes galantes*, and finally as the topical painter of the enchanted genre scene that is the *Enseigne de Gersaint*. Watteau's ideas of nature and reality retained until the end their decorative aspect; that aspect, like the marvellous glaze over finest porcelain, sometimes makes us forget the common materials which are the basic element.

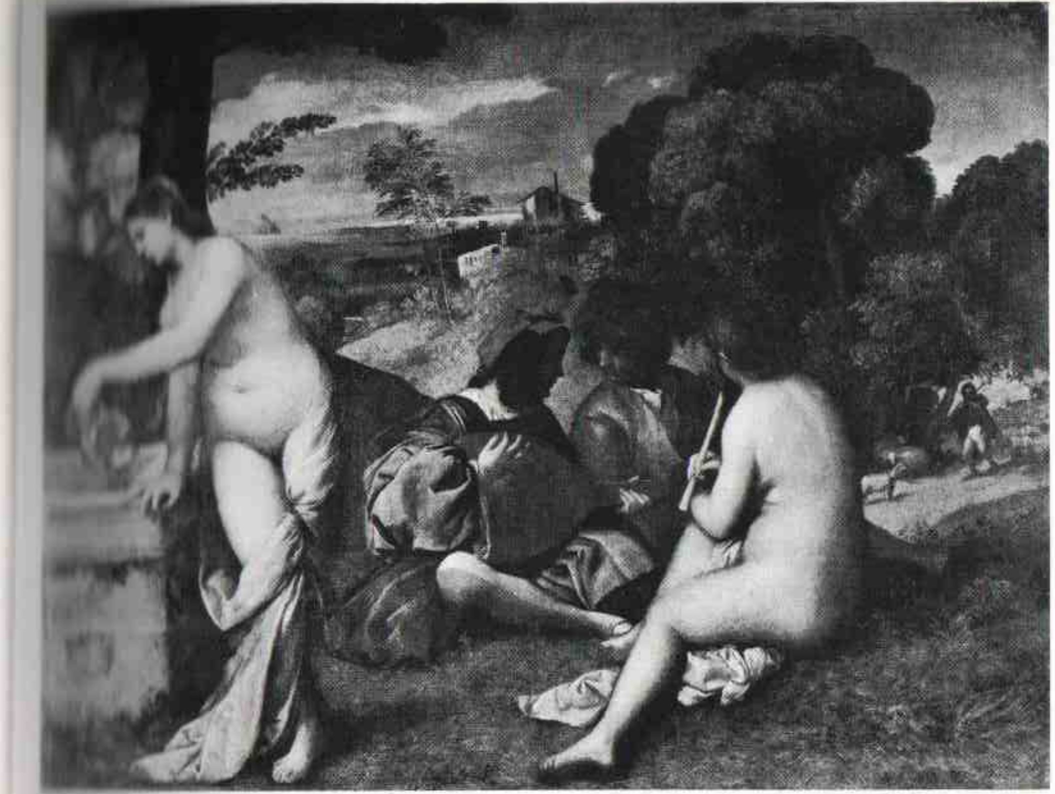
By the middle of the eighteenth century and with the arrival of Diderot ('*il ne va pas plus loin que l'émotion*', said Mademoiselle de Lespinasse), the decorative aspects of Watteau's art militated against him. By a re-definition of the 'natural', it was the emotional sensibility of Greuze that seemed nearer the truth. It was Watteau's turn to look artificial and frivolous. In 1762 d'Argenville wrote of him: '*Le goût qu'il a suivi est proprement celui des bambochades et ne convient pas au sérieux*.' Even if what he depicted was true to society, it merely showed the dallying of a decadent society which did not deserve to be taken seriously. That attitude to the immediate past was to be typical of nineteenth-century views. Even now, knowing so much better, there is still a tendency with us not to take seriously the subjects depicted by Watteau. Yet, like Goya at the other end of the period, Watteau was concerned with reason and passion.

The importance of his ideas to Watteau is revealed, or rather it is confirmed, in that famous picture of which the subject was left '*à sa volonté*', and which is now known to represent the *Departure from the Island of Cythera* (*Ill. 44*). Personally timid, easily exacerbated in human relationships, Watteau was not timid about his art. In his first years in Paris when he was solitary, poor, probably friendless, he must have decided the direction of his own genius: it was to lead him to the quintessential statement of this picture. The circumstances surrounding it are almost part of its perfection, and are certainly part of its legend, a tribute to the perspicacity of the Académie and the liberal climate of the period, symbolized by the attitude of Antoine Coypel, *premier peintre* when Watteau finally presented the *Departure* to that body.

It was himself that Watteau had presented in 1712, anxious to win a place at the French Academy in Rome. This was his second attempt; favoured by La Fosse and Coypel, he succeeded in winning instead a place in the Académie Royale – an extraordinary, unexpected event of which the early biographers catch an impressed echo. Invited to take the usual steps to join the Académie, Watteau was required to present a reception piece, the subject of which was customarily assigned by the Director: so customary was this procedure that the minutes for Watteau's reception on 30 July 1712 stated that he had been given his subject. But this phrase was deleted and the revolutionary words inserted that the subject of his composition was left to his own wish. Thus, even while Louis XIV still lived, a quiet blow was struck at the whole organized state institution of the arts in France. Watteau, without effort, had beaten the rules; it was the Académie which gave way.

The *Departure* was a large picture by Watteau's standards, measuring some six feet in length. It took him long to produce, perhaps through natural delays but also perhaps while he evolved the subject-matter and made it so completely personal. Not until 1717 did he submit the picture, '*représentant le Pèlerinage à l'isle de Cithère*'. That was how the Académie minutes recorded it; but once again a deletion took place, not to Watteau's advantage, and the words were substituted '*une feste galante*'. That is true as far as it goes. It may be a poor explanation of what Watteau has so carefully, and poignantly, depicted; but it grasps the essentials of a group of people enjoying themselves out of doors, involved in a cross between a dance and a picnic.

Though Watteau was to make this into a new category of picture, there were some prototypes. At least one of these was certainly known to him and they serve to emphasize the sheer difference – of mood as much as anything – manifested in the *Departure*; we feel this before we understand it, and that is a tribute to Watteau's subtle atmosphere. But no more than the rococo decorators was he without roots in the past. Like them he looked back to the twin stars – a place and a person – that were sixteenth-century Venice and Rubens. A Venetian painting which belonged to Louis XIV, and was then thought to be by Giorgione, was the *Fête champêtre* (*Ill. 32*), which ought ideally to have been known to Watteau. Perhaps it was; certainly it provides one of the first and most beautiful expressions of the freedom given by nature, with its group of idly amorous, relaxed, music-playing people. They are among the first people in painting to dare to do nothing, lilies of the field, conscious of their beauty and with an almost *fin de siècle* duty to that. And, just as in Watteau, music serves as the food of love.



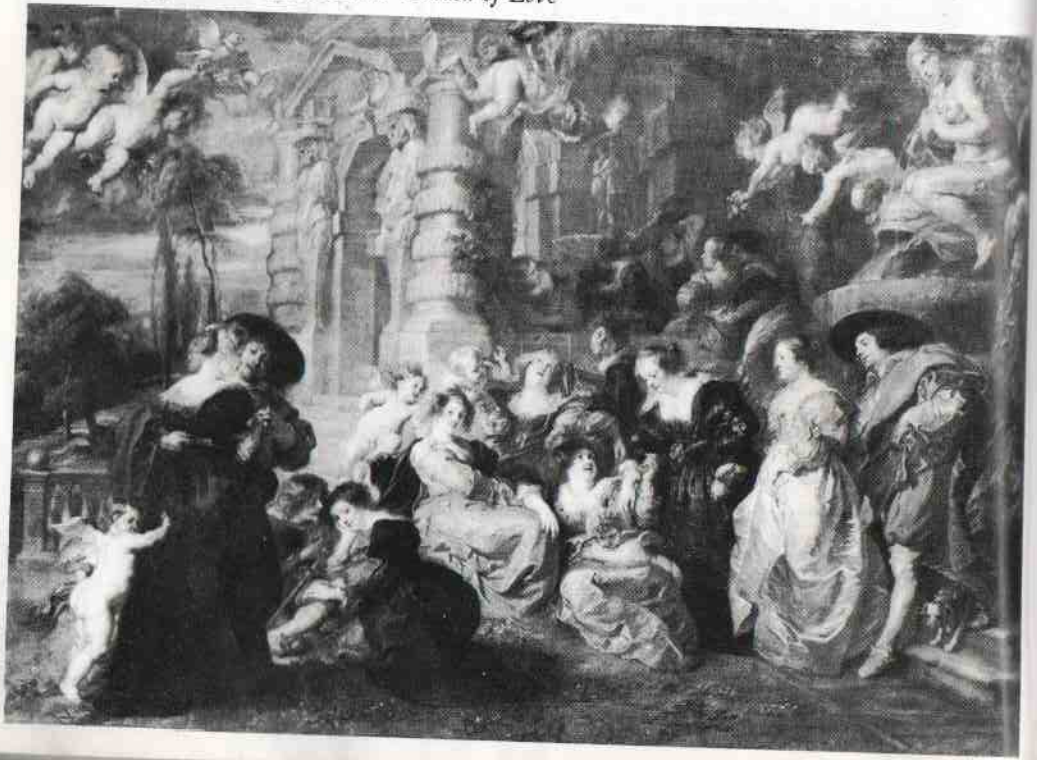
32 GIORGIONE (?) *Fête champêtre*

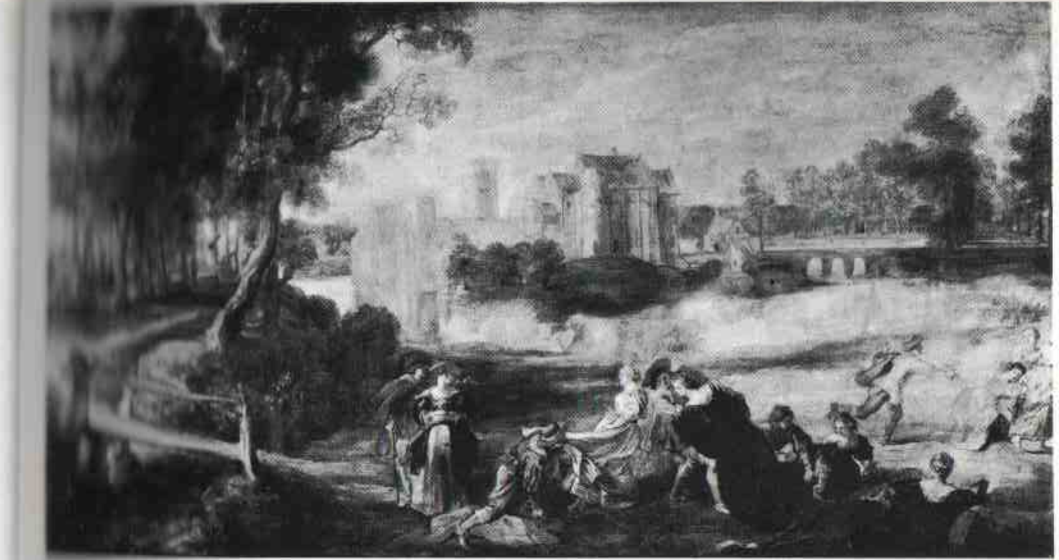
But with him everything was to be less languorous. One is tempted to feel that this was because of Rubens. The history of the triumph of *Rubénisme* is really embarrassing until it reaches Watteau. There was by then no originality as such in being influenced by Rubens, especially as their common Flemish background perhaps encouraged Watteau's attention to him. What mattered was the result of this awareness. Rubens showed Watteau a way of assimilating the art of the past, especially that of the Venetians. Yet that was probably the least of his revelations. Through Rubens came the realization of the dynamism in nature: not only manifested in human beings but in the whole cosmos. Rubens' pictures embrace in subject-matter almost every aspect of the visible world. They create new heaven and new earth, on a scale never equalled, and with a vitality that is Shakespearean. Through it all there crackles an electricity that seems powered by eroticism: love for all the tumbling, spilling cascades of fruit and flesh, intertwined bodies, gleaming materials, shafts of bright light, that is human experience at its most exciting. Rubens' sense of re-creation blazed out in the Marie de Médicis series on a huge scale. They are essentially actions, narrative pictures in which there is everywhere something happening. Watteau, we know, made friends with Audran, the Keeper of the Luxembourg, where the pictures then hung. He gazed at these pictures not with any wish to rival their tremendous pageantry (*Ill. 8*) but, as it were, with the intention of tapping off their vigour and vitality, avoiding the cosmic involvement, and charging with equal electricity merely a few ordinary people in a park or garden.

Even here, Rubens had been before him. He had transposed down the heroic to create the *fête champêtre* that is the *Garden of Love* (*Ill. 33*), one version of which was certainly known to Watteau who borrowed from it. What he copied is less important than what it inspired in him. It is a painted allegory that strangely recalls the psychological poems of the Middle Ages, notably the *Roman de la Rose*. And its elements are, more relevantly, those to be encountered again in Watteau's reception-piece. Women seem to matter more than men; in some undefined way it is they who control the proceedings, they who have states of mind; they are the Rose that must consider the pains and joy of surrender. Already in Rubens there is the shrine to Venus – in his composition a fountain – with couples surrounding it and love palpably in the air (in the shape of encouraging *amoretti*). A mythology is invented for the purpose of expressing the progress of mutual love; and the stages range from the bashful couple at the left to the pair who, their vows to love paid, confidently descend the steps close to the fountain's basin.

Other pictures by Rubens hint less obviously towards Watteau's ideas. The small *Scene near a Castle* (*Ill. 34*) exists in several versions and was also engraved. Quite possibly Watteau never saw either the print or one of the paintings; and yet it is tempting to think he did, so much does it contain already of his art. The pink evening light which is reflected in the moat has the tender tone of his skies. The black dresses of the women are anticipation of the marvellous decorative use he was to make of the same colour in costumes. Finally, Rubens takes as his subject here nothing more than a group of people enjoying themselves in pleasant, open-air surroundings – flirting boisterously with each other. Although the gestures are much cruder than Watteau usually devises for his people, the mood

33 PETER PAUL RUBENS *Garden of Love*





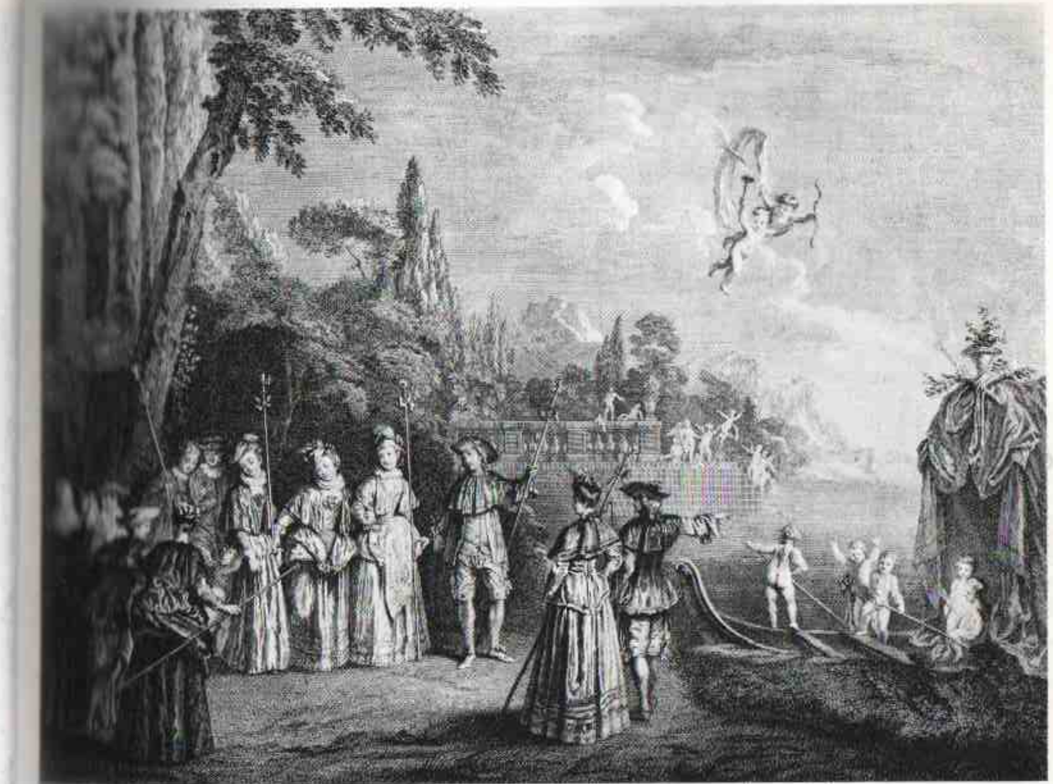
34 PETER PAUL RUBENS *Scene near a Castle*

is the same; the vivacity is a sexual one, with the countryside acting as an aphrodisiac. The closer people get to nature, the more natural their behaviour.

One returns to the nature depicted in the *Departure from Cythera* (*Ill. 44*). Until recently it was supposed that this picture represented a pilgrimage of lovers *to* the island of Cythera, with their gilded boat setting out into the promise of happiness on the misty horizon. However, it is now obvious that Watteau has depicted the pilgrims actually on the island, with the shrine of Venus at the right. A whole psychological chain of reaction is made up by the pairs of lovers – comparable to those in Rubens' *Garden of Love* – who extend from the statue down to the boat at the water's edge. The subject of setting out for the island, an earlier stage in the mythology as it were, was unmistakably depicted by Watteau in a composition which is probably earlier in date (*Ill. 35*). Here the men are proposing an amorous escapade, while the girls seem still rather hesitant. A cupid borrowed directly from the *Garden of Love* positively pushes the bashful girl at the left in the interlinked trio. Everything invites, in fact lights, the way to love. The lovers are going off in pilgrimage to a shrine where the reward is love itself; the girls may well hesitate before the adventure. The notoriously uninhibited effect of islands and pleasure-cruises is obvious enough and the dangers of Cythera had been advertised in a famous moral book, Fénelon's *Télémaque* (first published in 1698), in which the young hero describes in generalized chaste language the temptations he was there forced to undergo: '*On n'oublioit rien pour exciter toutes mes passions… et pour réveiller en moi le goût de plaisirs.*' What Fénelon calls temptation, Watteau makes a goal. It is not enough, however, to contrast serious *grand siècle* morality with the frivolous pleasure-loving Régence laxity that followed (like all such contrasts, it is only a half-truth, anyway). To Watteau the passions are important. It is true that he depicts his people on Cythera without any moral purpose but they have – or, rather, the painting is given – psychological purpose. It is concerned with a truth of human nature.

Usually concerned with love, love at work in society, Watteau usually paints a single psychological moment: the instant of music ceasing, of two people looking at each other as if for the first time. The ambitious intention of the *Departure* is to link a series of such moments into one artistic, psychological, whole: to create the perfect ensemble. The result is a miniature Mozart opera.

Mozart's theatre is removed from immediate reality by the convention of singing. Watteau too needs a convention, and his people are dressed in masquerade costume, pilgrims of the only god the eighteenth century really believed in,



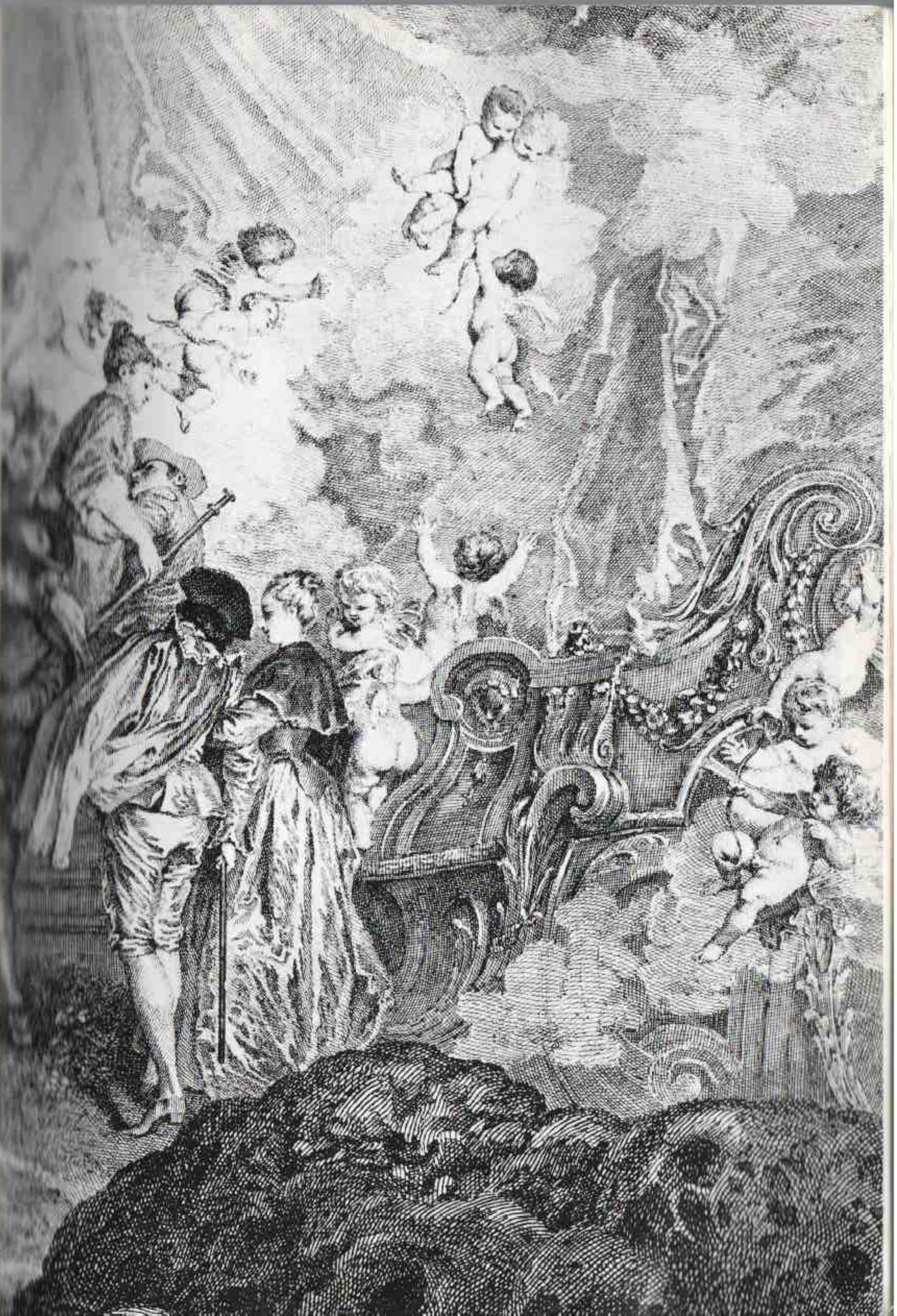
35 Jean-Antoine Watteau *The Island of Cythera*

and set on a dream island to which they have been brought in a gilded boat. These things, like the rose-hung statue of Venus where the lovers pay their vows, become part of the allegory. Love's power is strongest at that place where the kneeling man and seated woman whisper, oblivious of the cupid (also in pilgrim costume) who tugs at the woman's skirt in an attempt to recall her to reality. In every way, the picture is imbued with a poignant sense of the losing battle love fights against the reality of time. Sunset marks the end of love's day, along with the end of the pilgrimage, and intimations of dispersal set everyone in motion except the pair seated under the statue's spell. Further away a pair of lovers get to their feet; and beyond them pause another pair with the woman caught still in the spell, turning back with a regretful smile before descending to the crowd and the boat that so inexorably waits. Less confident than Shakespeare, Watteau sees that love *is* time's fool. The three pairs of lovers are merely the pictorial expression of the experiences of a single couple; and the reality they reach when they board the boat again is made quite explicit in Watteau's second version of the composition, that done for Jullienne and now at Berlin. Here the whole scene has become a touch more obvious, with an additional pair of lovers chained in rose garlands, and a little less evanescent. But beside the boat there is now also a pair of cupids, one of whom is shooting an arrow, feather-end foremost, at embarking lovers – as if threatening their disunity (*Ill. 36*). The return to the shores of reality will bring the lovers back to the point of the earlier composition (*Ill. 35*), to the point in fact before they become lovers.

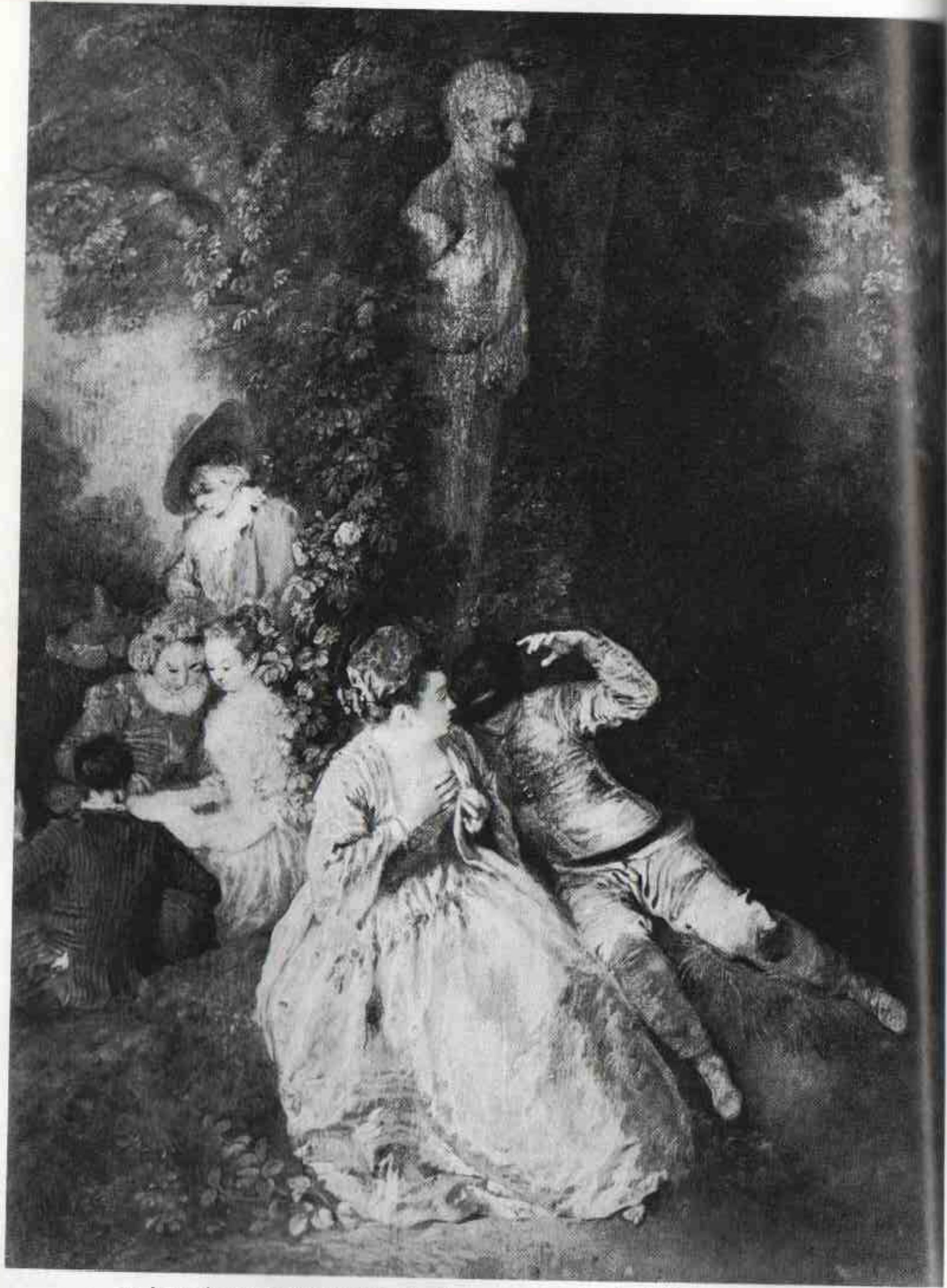
In its own way, the *Departure from Cythera* is a history picture, but a modern one. Its mythology is of Watteau's creation but it manages to tell a completely comprehensible story – unlearned yet universal – and there need be little doubt that Watteau constructed this elaborate scene because of its final destination, the Académie. By his standards, it is unusually full of narrative content. His subject is more 'natural' than visions of gods and goddesses or scenes from classical history. It is concerned not with heroism but with passion.

Watteau was almost certainly indebted to the theatre for the actual machinery of pilgrim lovers, and perhaps even for the idea of a journey to Cythera. But the attraction of the theatre for him must have been stronger than this, and it extends to the actors themselves. They stand first for new freedom: to mock at society and not to conform with it. Then the actor disguises himself, plays roles, and is always involved in the game of appearances. The eighteenth-century theatre was to produce several sophisticated masterpieces where the characters within the play are disguised again – and from this disguise springs the psychological fact of love or unlove. Only a game of false appearances will show the final truth, as it is seen in *Le Jeu de l'Amour et du Hasard* or *Le Mariage de Figaro*.

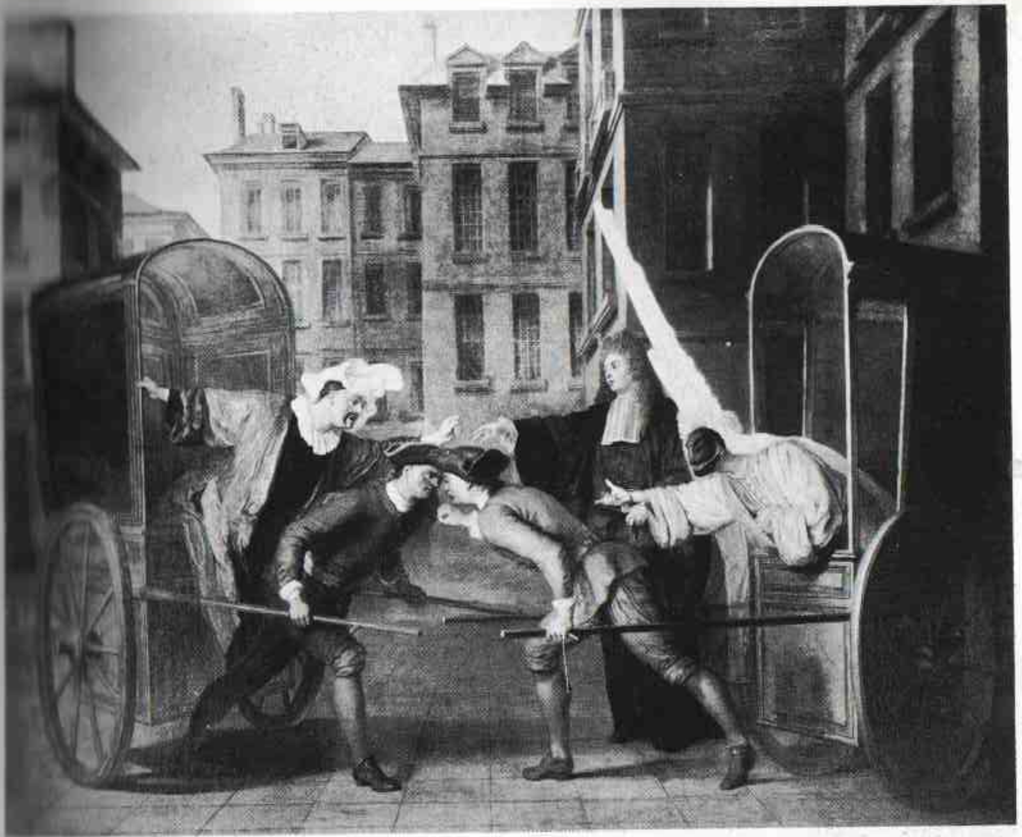
The world especially of the Italian Comedians, satirical and topical and yet concerned with love, had already been utilized by Claude Gillot (1673–1722), under whom Watteau was to study. Gillot's *Quarrel of the Cab Men* (*Ill. 38*), though amusing and vivid, is hardly more than a transcript of the theatre. Watteau was to take this urban theatre, urban in its setting too, and set it free in parks and gardens (*Ill. 37*), converting grotesquerie into enchanted love-making. In a different way from the pair of pilgrim lovers in the *Departure*, the pair of the girl and Harlequin here are isolated from the rest of the group, seated under an antique statue that seems severely aloof from their vivacity, not presiding but



36 JEAN-ANTOINE WATTEAU *Departure from the Island of Cythera (detail)*



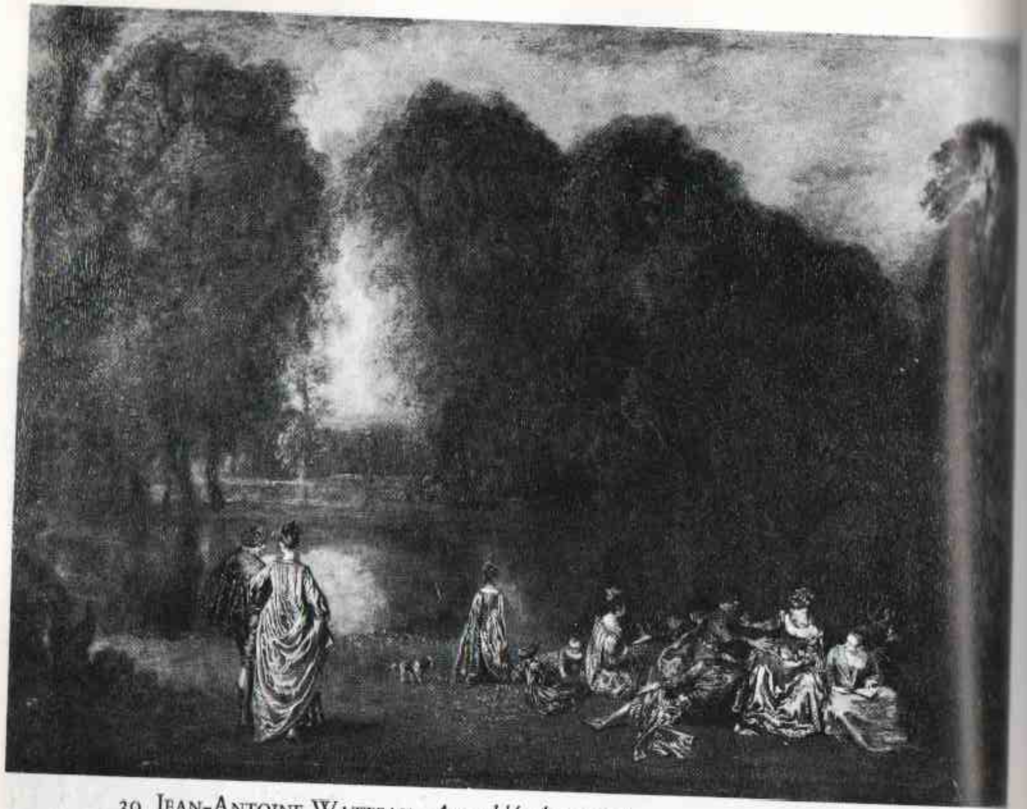
37 JEAN-ANTOINE WATTEAU *Voulez-vous triompher des belles?*



38 CLAUDE GILLOT *Quarrel of the Cab Men*

rather standing a stone reminder of what remains long after life and love are ended ('*Le Buste/ Survit à la cité*'). Harlequin is a comedian who is also a lover; indeed, here perhaps it is a lover who has merely assumed his costume; or perhaps the whole group are actors, strolling players who have paused to rehearse a song in open air surroundings. What is very typical of Watteau is to depict a group and yet isolate a pair within it. Across the general air of social gaiety there blows a sudden current of serious love, putting two people on an island of their own.

What is only a hint, a light-hearted one, in the *Voulez-vous triompher* becomes almost the subject of the *Assemblée dans un parc* (*Ill. 39*) where a natural setting is much more fully realized and the figures are framed by it, themselves almost as much the product of a mood as the pale water and misty trees. It is wrong to



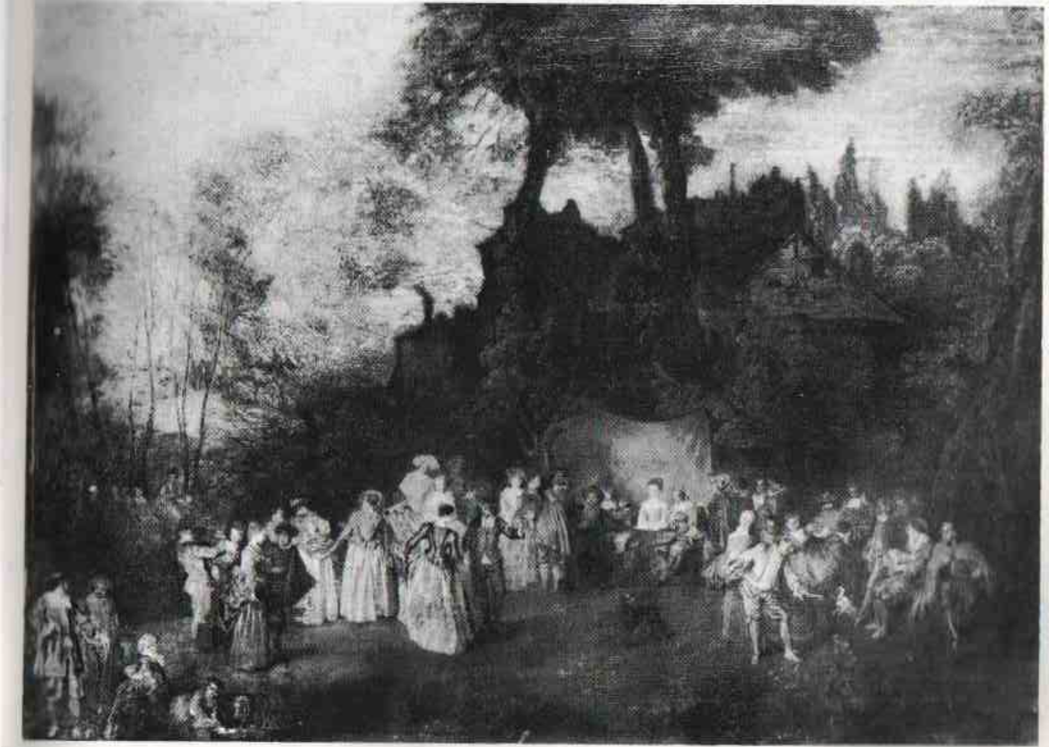
39 JEAN-ANTOINE WATTEAU *Assemblée dans un Parc*

think of such pictures as ones where nothing is happening. If one asks what this picture, what all Watteau's pictures, are *about*, they are about men and women falling in love, trying to make up a society of love which nothing will disturb. At the left stroll a pair who have achieved a relationship which eludes the central pair of the right-hand group: there rougher methods of love-making do not succeed. A woman well able to take care of herself repulses a clumsy, too-eager man. The landscape seems to side with the tranquil lovers; autumnal trees crowd about the long stretch of placid lake and, across the water, almost lost in the twilight, a third pair of lovers embrace.

This picture is unusual for the absence of music in it. For after the benevolent effect of nature on the heart there comes next in Watteau the effect of music, especially the entwined harmony of voice and instrument which becomes a symbol of love. Music is present not merely to suggest an amorous mood but because it was part of Watteau's own personality. To Caylus it seemed worthy of note that someone basically uneducated, a yokel in upbringing, should have had this responsiveness; there is some supercilious surprise in his testimony but that makes it the more trustworthy: '*quoiqu'il n'eût point reçu d'éducation, il avoit de la finesse, et même de la délicatesse pour juger de la musique.*'

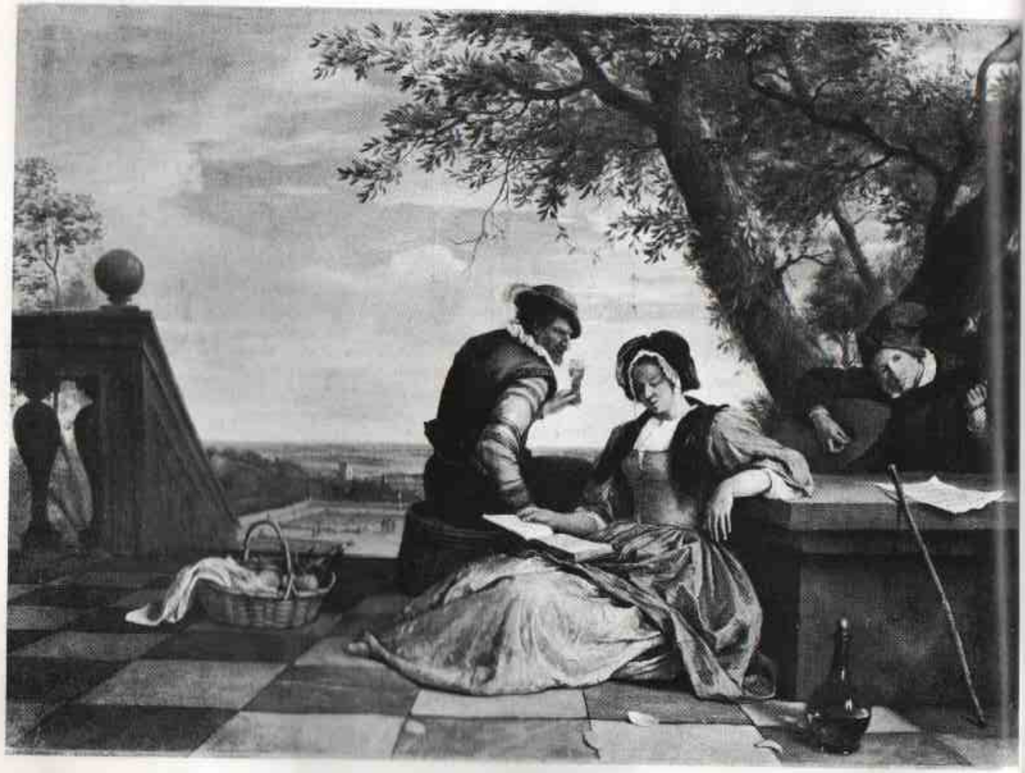
In Watteau it is usually the man who plays the musical instrument and the woman who sings. He is the serenader, and she joins in or not. Watteau's women are always courted and they have the power to refuse. This is probably never better suggested than in *Le Mezzetin* (*Ill. 45*), in which the Italian comedian's costume serves as half-disguise for the lonely serenader whose dependence on the unseen woman is wonderfully suggested – very much as it is in *Don Giovanni* during '*Deh vieni alla finestra*'. It is perhaps conscious irony that seems to convey that his plea is hopeless by placing a very modern-looking female statue with its back to the lonely mezzetin; she is deaf and stone, and perhaps the same is true of the living woman. Thus, there are times when music does not immediately bring harmony; it only invokes it.

40 JEAN-ANTOINE WATTEAU *L'Accordée de Village*



In his use of music in painting, Watteau must have been influenced by the use made of it in Dutch seventeenth-century genre pictures, which once or twice come very close to stating a Watteau theme. The *Terrace Scene (Ill. 41)* by Jan Steen assembles all the elements out of which Watteau was to construct something much more profound as well as elegant. But Watteau not only seemed, he really was, in this tradition. For all his homage to Venice, he belonged with the Northern artists who were just coming to be appreciated in Paris. Steen's picture is unenchanted reality – unfired, very human clay – which Watteau was to make the basis of his art, transmuting it as he built upon it. Some of Watteau's early pictures combine rural merry-making and music in a completely seventeenth century way, with recollections of Teniers rather than Steen, and yet they already have made something completely new and silken out of this homespun material. *L'Accordée de Village* (*Ill. 40*), damaged though it is, retains something of this refinement – very different from artificiality – with which Watteau is able to treat not only his peasants but their surroundings. Even the gaiety of the scene is muted accordingly, and there is a tender atmosphere about this microcosm of society, ranging across the composition from the children to the aged hurdy-gurdy man, with the future bride stiffly seated, rather solitary, in the centre. This picture alone is reminder of the peasant Watteau who had received no education; whatever refinement his art gives the scene, it is the world he knows and from which he sprang.

41 JAN STEEN *Terrace Scene*



That knowledge is still present, lying behind the apparently much more idyllic, and much later, *Fête vénitienne (Ill. 43)* – a quite meaningless, or at least misleading, title. And here there is nothing rustic about the dancers or the handsome park in which the company has gathered. There is less ostensible subject too. Simply a group of people, in Watteau's usual way, is collected, talking, dancing, music-playing, in the open air. The superb handling of the paint hardly needs any comment; it is paint that seems inspired by vitality as well as beauty, moving with a sort of wit comparable to the wit displayed, or hinted, in the subject-matter. While the paint runs, neither too thick nor too thin, in an effortless creation of creased silks, copper-coloured, mauve-pink, olive green – like a fan of pigments suddenly extended – Watteau's imagination seems to create a completely fresh situation for his characters, taking puppet people and filling them with recognizable personalities.

Partly apparent to the naked eye, and confirmed by technical photographs, are several changes made by the artist while working on the picture. The most obvious is the change made in the male dancer, in profile at the left. Originally he was seen from the back, with one hand extended, his face turned towards the woman and quite anonymous, even insipid, in character. Although he appears to have been completely painted, the whole figure was drastically changed by Watteau. He substituted an easily recognizable portrait of his friend Vleughels, a painter with whom he had lodged, giving this figure a new, challenging (perhaps characteristic) pose. He no longer extends a gracefully inviting hand; and he seems to look across the picture, past the woman, to the seated bagpiper.

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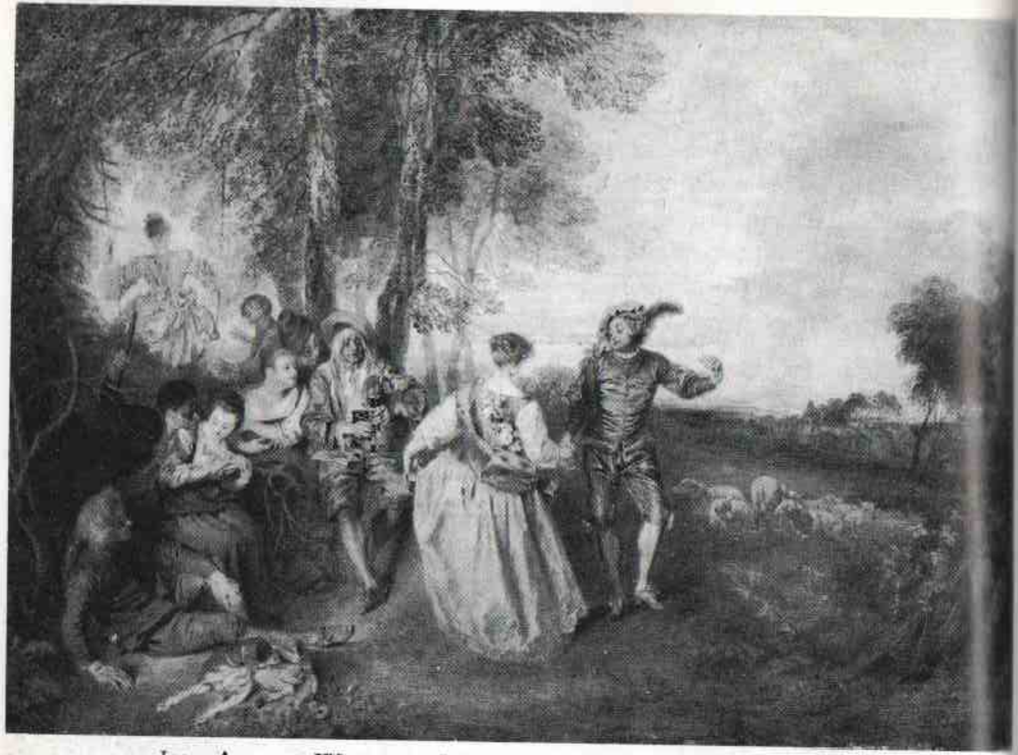
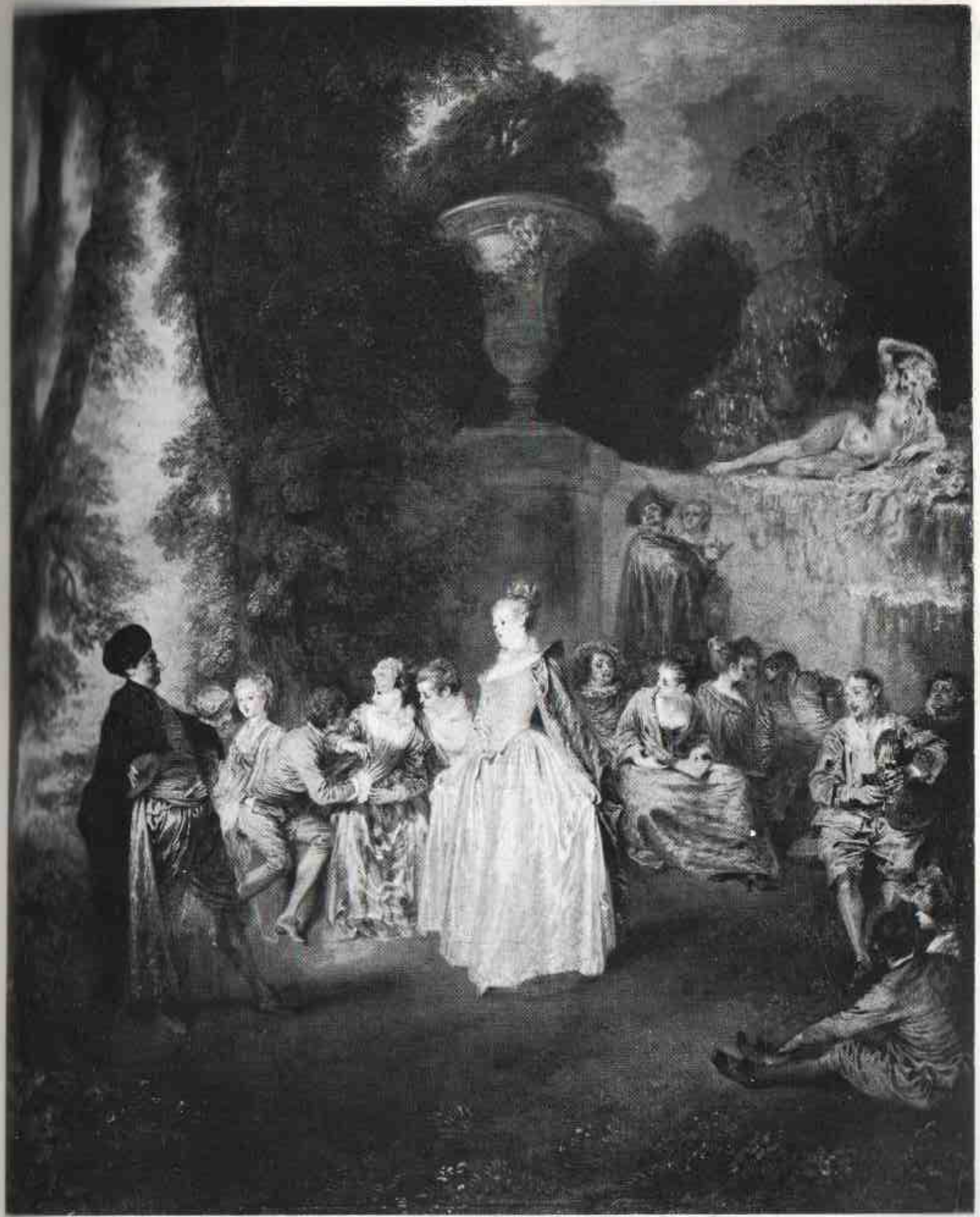
When this figure is examined, his incongruousness in the company becomes remarkable. The setting and costumes evoke an elegant society – at least, one fashionably if fancifully dressed. The majority are conversing among themselves; only he seems somewhat apart, an effect which his plain clothes emphasize, and an object of scrutiny by the naked fountain nymph. This statue, lazily coming to life, quizzes his presence, disturbed perhaps by the uncouth music of his bagpipes. In fact it is a portrayal of Watteau himself. When the picture was engraved, the very talented engraver (Laurent Cars) recognized the self-portrait of Watteau but made him look rather younger and less haggard. Watteau's



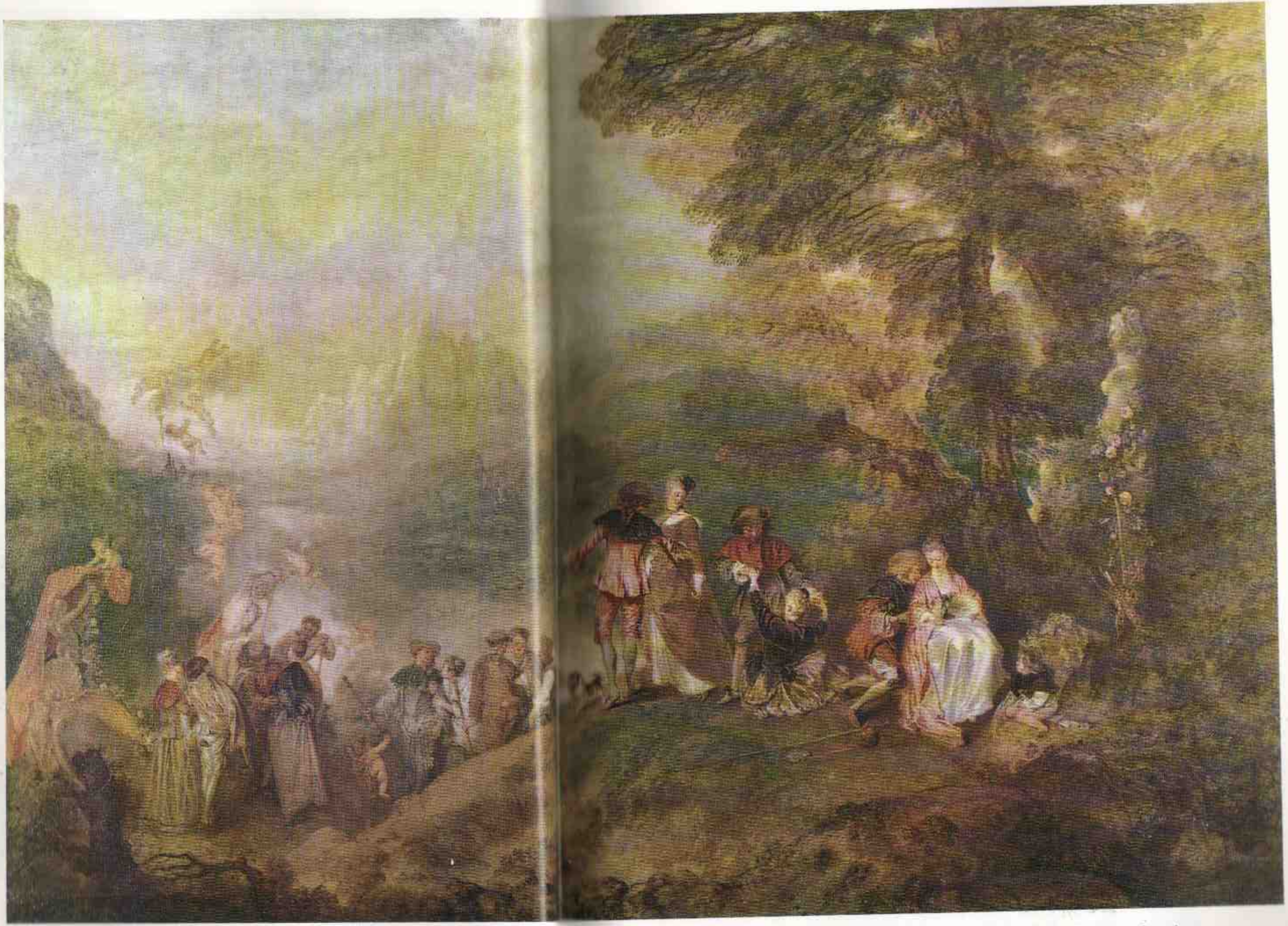
42 Jean-Antoine Watteau *Les Bergers*

awareness of his own appearance is tragically closer to the truth. It must have been equal mordant awareness that made him paint himself in what are deliberately rustic clothes and playing an almost absurdly rustic instrument. He thereby seems to identify himself with the old shepherd who plays the bagpipes in a completely rustic picture, *Les Bergers* (*Ill. 42*), an almost clownish figure whose dancing days – if they ever existed – are long over. Watteau puts on the wide breeches and yellow leather apron which are the bagpiper's costume; he too wears a strap (of the instrument?) round his right arm.

Across the composition he gazes back at Vleughels. They are placed at almost equal distance from the woman who is herself probably a portrait, perhaps of Charlotte Desmares, an actress whom Watteau had certainly drawn. These three figures seem involved in more than the ostensible dance. Watteau sits out to play for his two friends; but though he may show himself in peasant disguise, they are not dancing the countrified measure of the pair with hands clasped in



43 Jean-Antoine Watteau *Fête vénitienne*



44 Jean-Antoine Watteau *Departure from the Island of Cythera*

Les Bergers. They tread a more stately dance, perhaps emphasizing the incongruity of matching it to bagpipe music. The picture is shot through with gleams of irony, hints that are now hard to understand, and a tension that seems unmistakable and yet impalpable. Watteau's own portrayal of himself comes so close to the description of him given many years later by Caylus that it seems no accident, simply somewhat sardonic self-awareness of how he appeared to others: '*tendre et peut-être un peu berger*'.

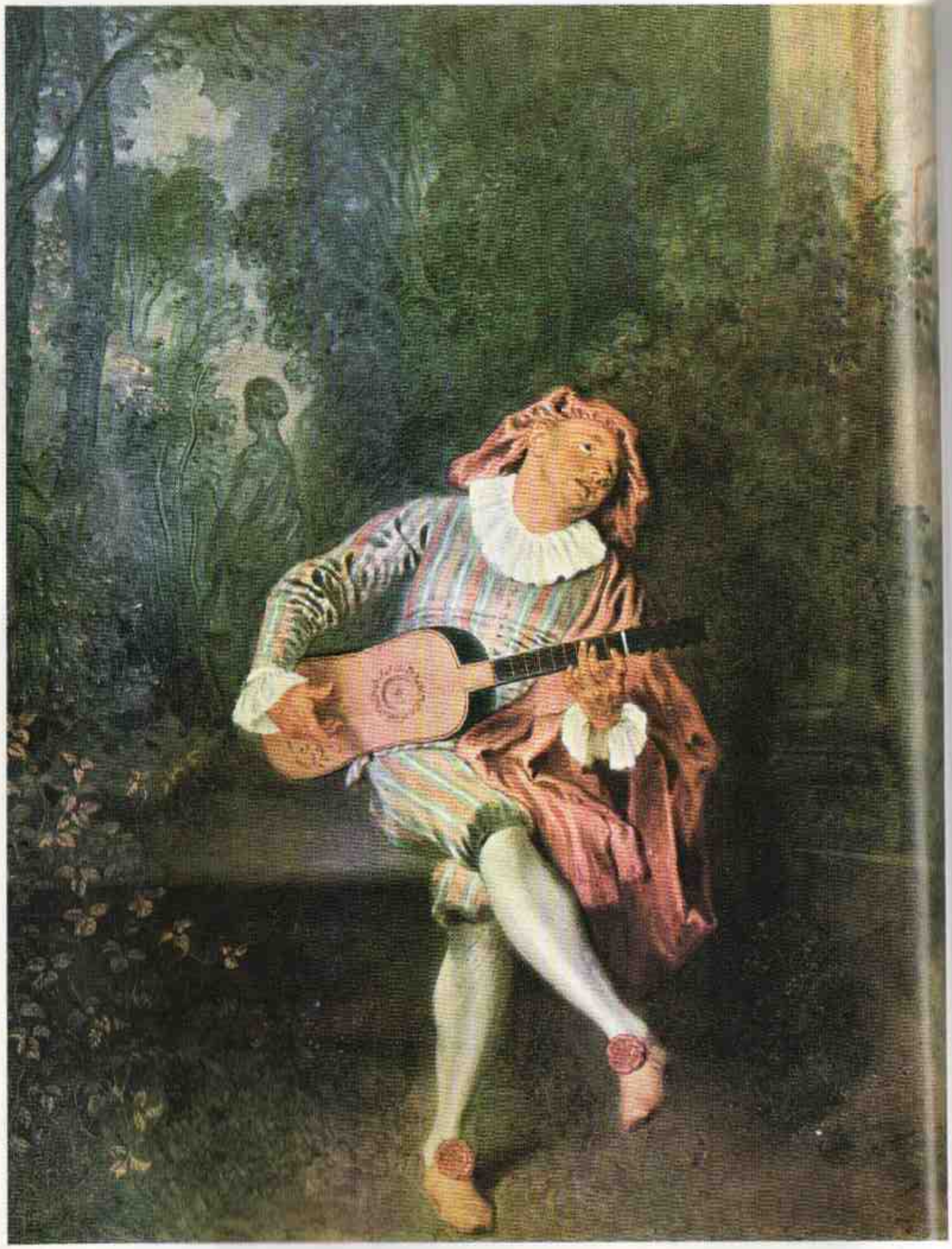
This late picture shows Watteau moving beyond the enchanted mythology of Cythera – not into deeper dreams but closer to disenchanted reality. To some extent the lonely *Mezzetin* (*Ill. 45*) was in the same mood. Both pictures are quite small and it was on a large scale that he summed up the sense of isolation and odd man out, in the *Gilles* (*Ill. 46*). Though this is no self-portrait, the sense of self-identification is very strong and adds to the poignant effect. The group of laughing actors in the background, with a clown tugged along Silenus-like on a donkey, is probably inspired by an engraving of Gillot's; but what had been his main subject is deliberately reduced by Watteau to a frieze of busts that do not interfere with the tall white figure of Gilles, perfectly still, posed frontally against the empty sky. Once again, a figure seems to assume clothes for a part. Just as in the *Fête vénitienne* Watteau's own sensitive features and beautifully articulated hands contrasted with his humble costume, so Gilles seems too dignified for the clown's white floppy tunic and abbreviated trousers. The moon-shaped hat encircles a vividly painted but solemn face, its lack of animation the more marked when compared with the boisterous lively faces behind. There is a complete separation between the group and the individual; they are active while he is idle, having fun while he remains unsmiling, welded into a self-contained group while he gazes out directly at the spectator. It is difficult not to feel that Watteau intends his to be the real awareness. He stands there a little dumbly, himself with a smack of the *berger* but dependent, like all entertainers, on his audience. The picture's mood is complex and inexplicably moving; it seems to record not a prologue but an epilogue (as so often in Watteau), a silencing of laughter and the sort of hush that pricks the eyes with unshed tears. It is like the moment at the end of *Twelfth Night* when the plots have all been disentangled, the lovers paired off, and only the clown is left, singing to comfort himself and justify a player's existence: 'And we'll strive to please you every day.'

By itself, this picture reveals how far Watteau had cut his style off from the rococo decorators. He continued in pursuit not so much of natural appearances

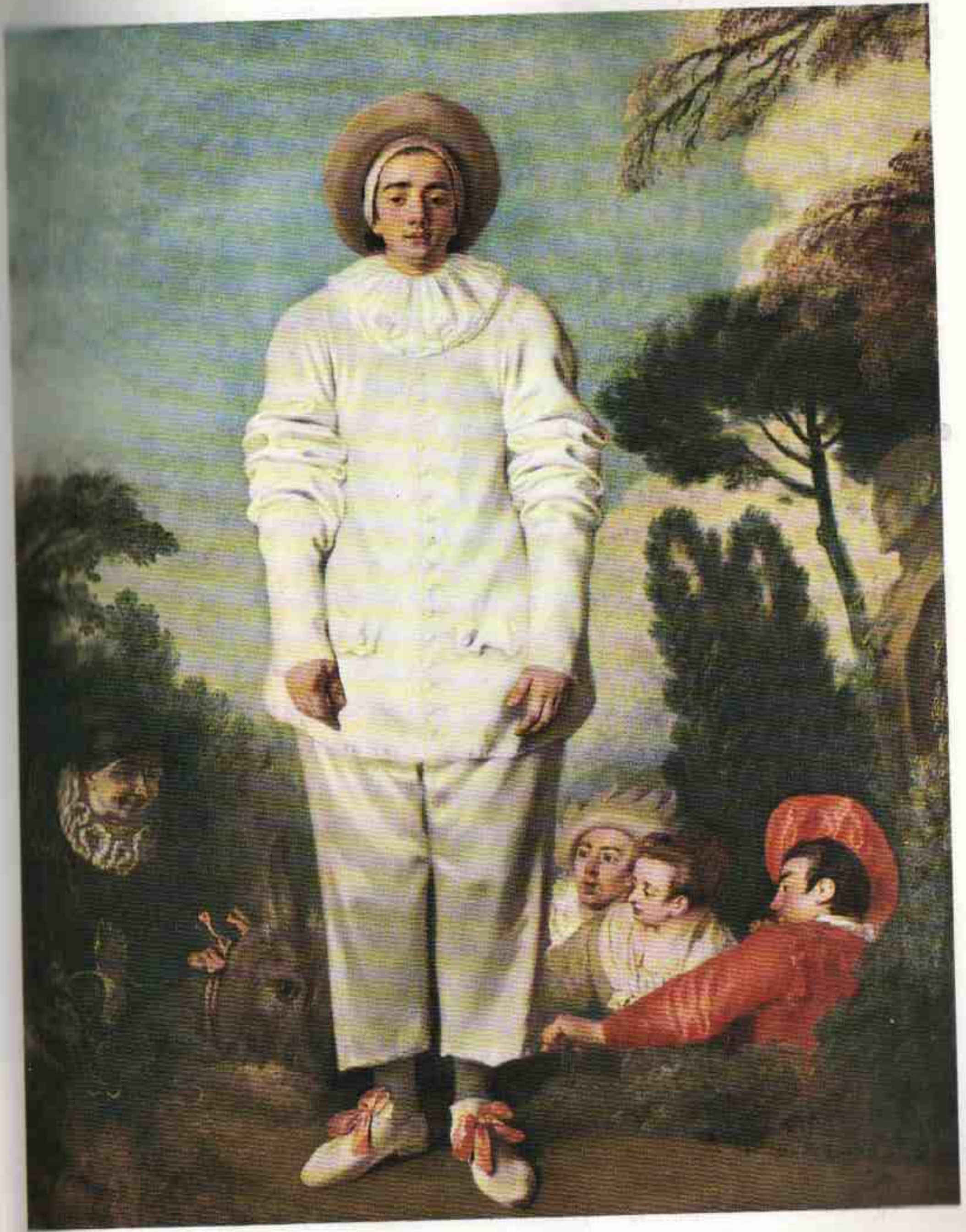
as of human nature. Of course, he understood that the two can go together; and he was to bring them together in one final, supreme, and large-scale treatment, self-commissioned: *L'Enseigne de Gersaint* (*Ills. 47* and *48*). Although nothing so marvellous could have been foreseen, the creation of this picture is logical. It is Watteau's testimony, made solemn by the circumstances, to his passionate attachment to visible things and people. In his own way he had always been a painter of genre. Beneath the airiest of his pictures there lies the scaffolding of his superb drawings, themselves a body of evidence testifying to his vigorous grasp on the hard shell of facts. Ourselves, our place in ordinary life – and in the scheme of things: these were the subjects of interest to the eighteenth century. Watteau, reluctant to make any moral judgment, any metaphysical statement, created instead this view of people in a recognizable environment, in Paris, in the shop of his friend Gersaint. Their aims are still the same as they always were in Watteau's pictures; only this time it is love in a shop instead of a garden, and buying and selling now take the place of music in society.

Because quite early (around 1744) it left France for Frederick the Great's collection at Berlin, the picture was not there to help Diderot, for instance, to comprehend Watteau's art. But it may well have influenced the young Chardin, very different though it is from anything he produced. It is a key document, as well as a masterpiece, in which almost every eighteenth-century artistic interest is contained – except the moral one. It is decoration, and *trompe-l'œil* decoration, intended for the front of Gersaint's shop – probably for that reason composed, as well as cut, in two halves; not only does it give the illusion of dissolving the shop wall, so that one steps directly in from the street, but the illusion is itself witty: expanding the poky reality of a shop on the Pont Notre-Dame to this grandiose room, with its glimpse of a tall-windowed salon beyond, papered with pictures that Gersaint probably never owned. Thus, though it is genre, it is enchanted genre, animated not only by wit but by a ubiquitous eroticism no longer conveyed through the presence of cupids. It is the paint itself which communicates an almost feverish excitement, a hectic vitality, to the society assembled here in autumn colours, chrysanthemum tones of bronze and yellow and pink, set off by black and silver-grey.

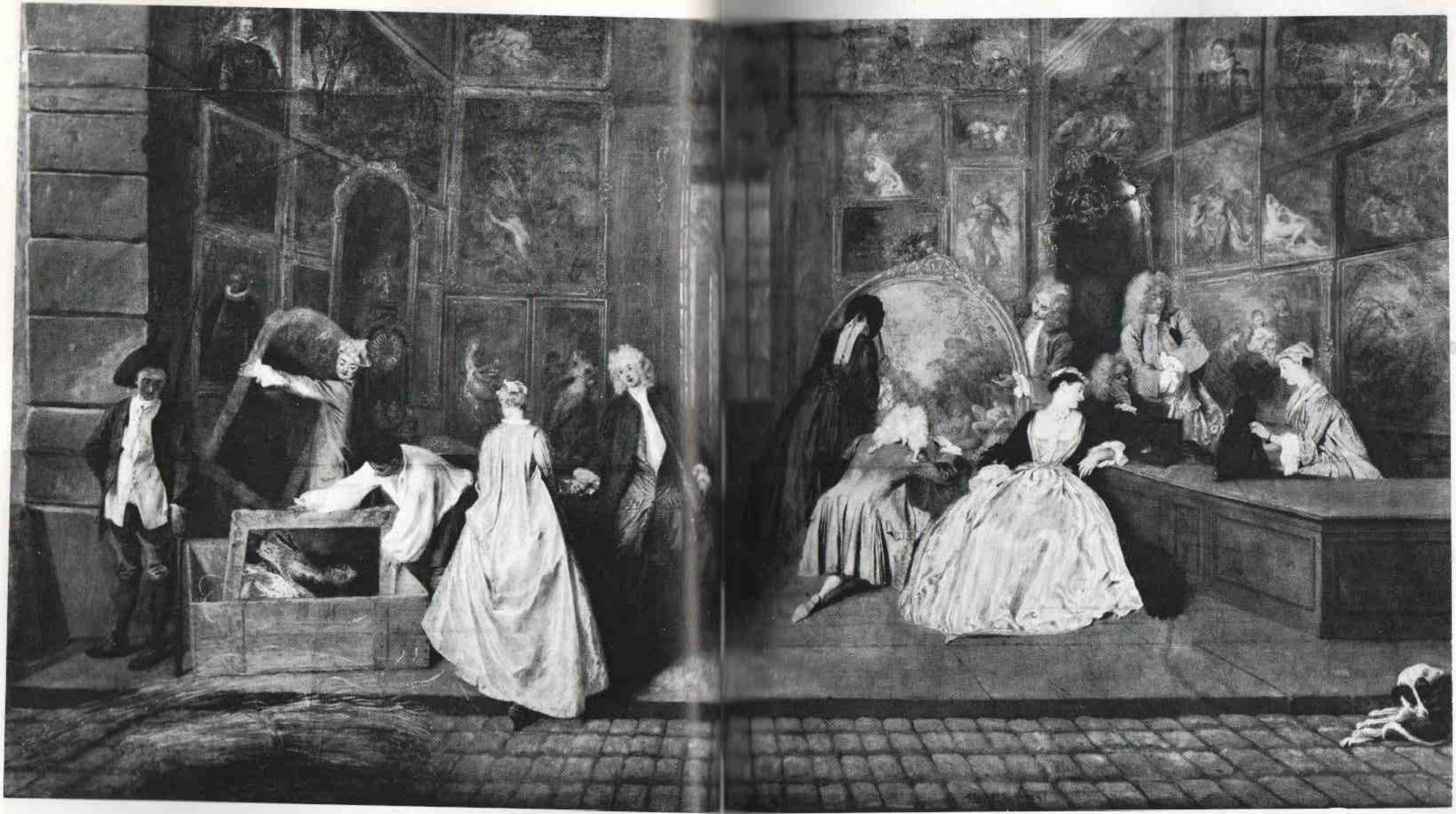
These figures are no longer in fancy dress but in fashionable costume, painted with ravishing response not only to lace and silken textures but to plain linen too – like the pierrot-style shirt of the man handling the portrait of Louis XIV. There are no subsidiary groups on a small scale; all the figures have equal



45 JEAN-ANTOINE WATTEAU *Le Mezzetin*



46 JEAN-ANTOINE WATTEAU *Gilles*



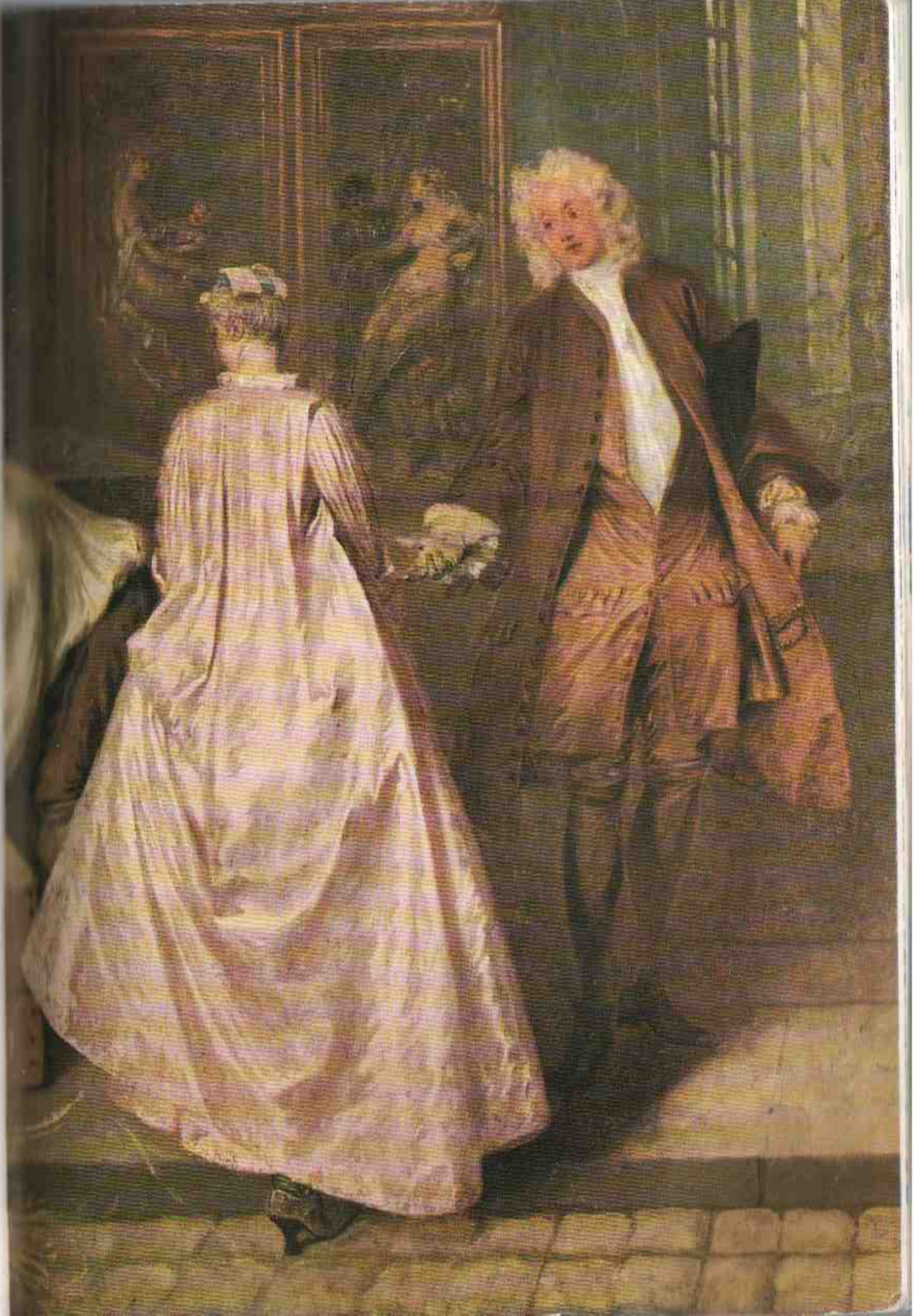
47 Jean-Antoine Watteau *L'Enseigne de Gersaint*

importance in the dance-like rhythm which undulates in and out across the composition, with a convenient pause at the centre. The spectator is invited into the picture by the girl who steps from the street into the shops; her ankle breaks the long horizontal where the two meet and her stocking is revealed as a surprising sage green. As she advances, her partner gallantly steps forward as if in a minuet. They are the last of Watteau's couples, brushed by an invisible amorous genius present in Gersaint's shop – more obviously present in some of the pictures on the walls and quite patently in the large *Baignade* being examined so closely by the kneeling man who has got down to thigh level. In the group who examine a mirror held by the pretty serving-girl there is more ambiguity: the men examine her as well as the mirror, and the mirror reflects back the image of the beautifully-dressed woman customer who gazes somewhat sadly at it. There is nothing so concrete as a story, but all these people – themselves objects of *grand luxe* – seem looking for more than works of art; and the picture becomes concerned with the shop of the human heart.

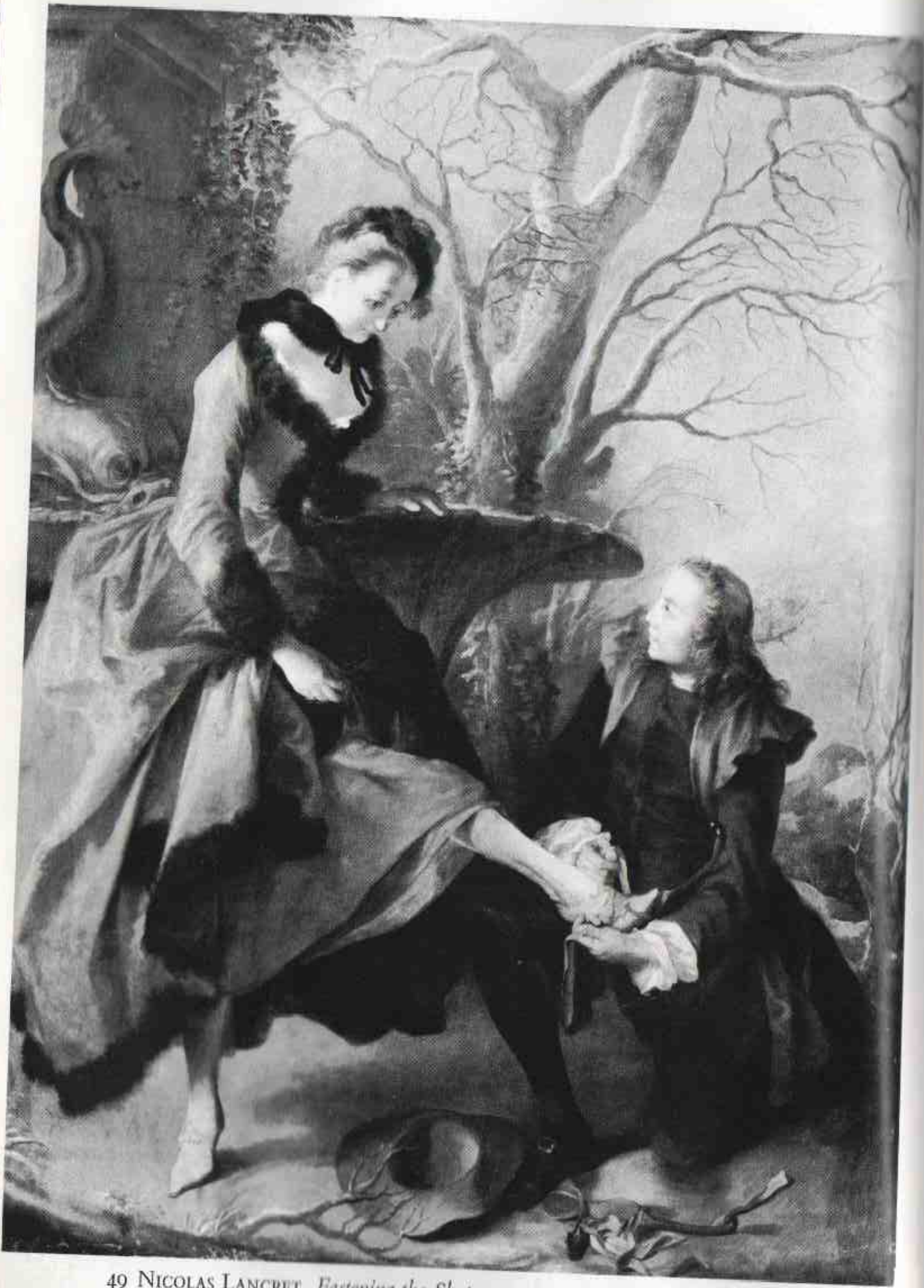
The tantalizing sense of psychological realism, perhaps present from the first in Watteau's work, is seen here on quite a new scale. There could be no advance beyond it, because Watteau was to die the year after it was painted, dying in the arms of Gersaint. The intensity behind the *Enseigne de Gersaint* comes from life looked at in a way it can be looked at perhaps only by the artist and the dying; and Watteau was both. The world of Rubens, which had allured him so much, is rivalled here, in scale and handling, and paid too a last homage in the curled-up dog which comes from the *Coronation of Marie de Médicis (Ill. 8)*. This is the real triumph of *Rubénisme*; out of homage and emulation has come a quite new art.

Its originality could be copied in turn but not kept alive once Watteau himself was dead. He had created a vogue, and this perhaps damaged his own art in the eyes of the next generation. Without Watteau the *fête galante* was soon to dwindle to triviality, but his example gave further impetus to the unco-ordinated desire for freedom. The difficult balance between decoration and genre was to be held best in France by Nicolas Lancret (1690–1743), immensely successful during his lifetime but who has perhaps suffered too much in reputation for his proximity to Watteau. Frederick the Great felt none of this, and collected both painters in quantity. Lancret did not attempt any psychological insight, but his eternal charm and his keen eye for contemporary manners led to pictures which occasionally are minor masterpieces. *Fastening the Skate* (*Ill. 49*) is more overt than Watteau, from whom the subject derives, but less obvious than many pictures by Boucher. It contains a neat mixture of truth and sentimental fiction, seizing on the decorative aspects of winter and winter clothes as the setting for one more flirtatious exchange between man and woman.

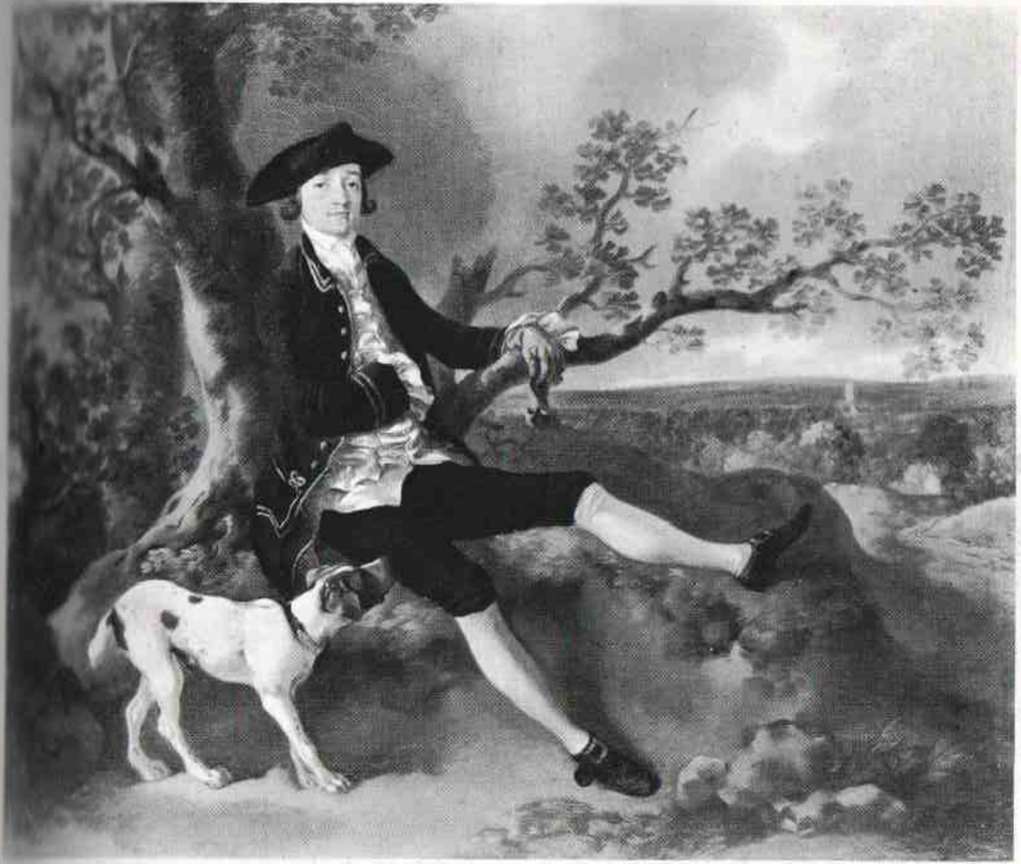
All over Europe Watteau stood as symbol of a new gracefulness and ease: the proof that the painter can tackle apparently flippant subject-matter and yet be a great artist. Watteau's own attitude was soon to matter no longer; he represented something which he might not always have wished to be. With the publication of his work in the corpus of the *Œuvre gravé*, his compositions exercised



48 Jean-Antoine Watteau *L'Enseigne de Gersaint (detail)*

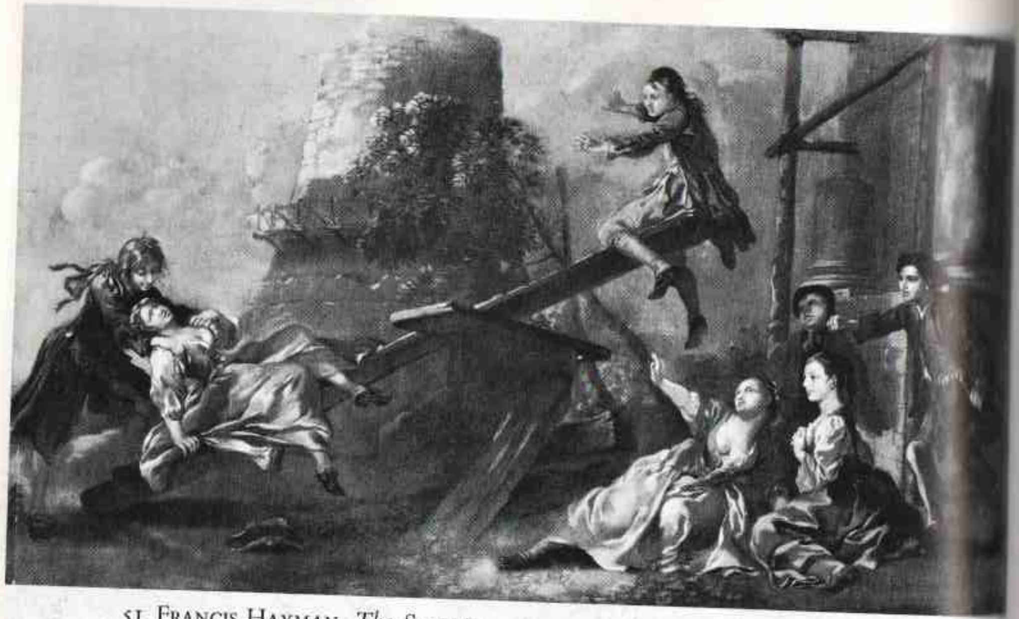


49 NICOLAS LANCRET *Fastening the Skate*



50 THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH *Mr Plampin*

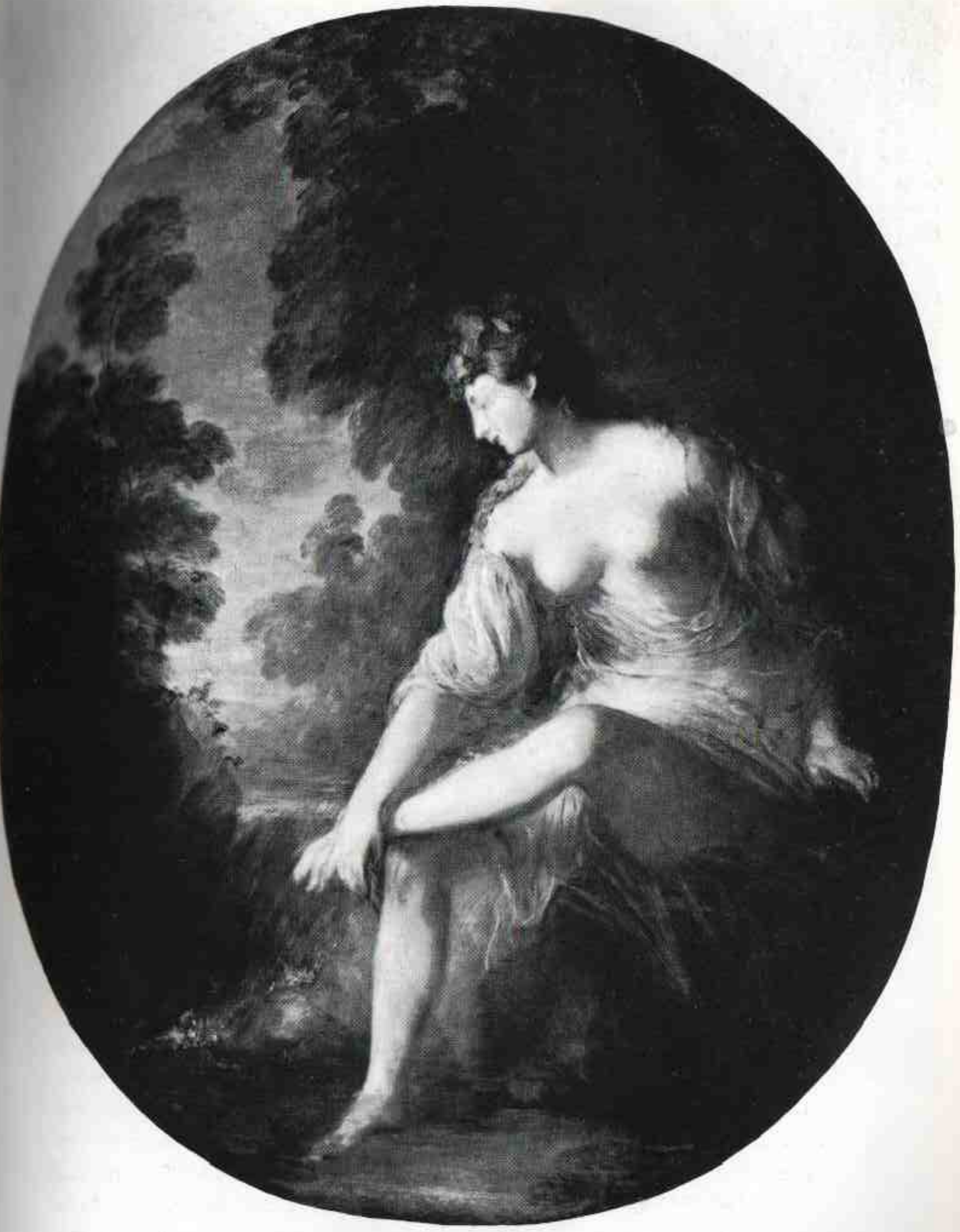
an influence which was perhaps sometimes hardly conscious. A Frenchified grace in genre subjects was attempted everywhere, even in England. Pictures like *The See-saw* (*Ill. 51*) by Francis Hayman (1708–76) are really closer to Lancret than Watteau, but they exemplify a European movement, of which the last echoes are detectable in Goya's tapestry cartoons. The most personal response to Watteau is in Gainsborough, a great painter who yet seldom painted anything resembling a Watteau subject. Several of Gainsborough's early portraits show him utilizing Watteau's compositions for his sitters, through his knowledge of the *Œuvre gravé*. The feathery countryside and nymphs that appeared in Watteau's portrait of his friend Antoine de La Roque have been replaced by solid Suffolk countryside in Gainsborough's *Mr Plampin* (*Ill. 50*), who yet poses similarly.



51 Francis Hayman *The See-saw*

But Gainsborough borrows more than a pose, as his later pictures confirm. It is freedom that exhales from his portraits: the freedom of nature and natural settings is allied to free handling, and the whole expresses the idiosyncratic character of his sitters, so relaxed and yet lively, just like Gainsborough's own nature. The painter who described himself in a letter to a patron as 'but a wild goose at best' was clearly Watteau's cousin, taking the same freedom for the artist as he expressed in his art, and conscious of being the odd man out in ordinary society. Gainsborough, if anyone, was the heir to Watteau's art, but he was not to turn to the 'fancy picture' (*Ill. 52*) until late in life; and there would have been little patronage for an English painter producing *fêtes galantes* in preference to portraits.

In the rest of Europe, there continued to be a demand also for large-scale decorative painting, continuing the rococo wave at the opening of the century. But this style of painting was no longer connected with libertarian artistic ideas; associated with the courts that fostered it, it increasingly seemed to enshrine, even glorify, reactionary concepts. The splendid confidence of Boucher and Tiepolo flagged before their deaths – they both painted until the end – and was replaced by the last twist of the rococo, a flying calligraphic twist, that disappeared with Fragonard.



52 Thomas Gainsborough *Musidora Bathing*