

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Jean-Antoine WATTEAU (Valenciennes 1684 - Nogent-sur-Marne 1721)**

## **Studies of a Woman Spurning a Man's Advances and a Woman Leaning Back**

Black chalk, graphite and red chalk, heightened with touches of white chalk, and traces of grey wash, on buff paper.

160 x 143 mm. (6 1/4 x 5 5/8 in.)

Although none of the three figures in this drawing can be related to any known painting by Watteau, it nevertheless stands as a supreme example of the artist's draughtsmanship at its very best. The artist's masterful use of the distinct *trois crayons* technique of black, red and white chalk, together with graphite, is here applied in different combinations in each of the figures, resulting in remarkable effects. As noted by Perrin Stein, on the occasion of this drawing's inclusion in an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2009, 'The intuitive mastery of red, black, and white chalk that Watteau had achieved by about 1715 is fully evident in this lively sheet of studies. The woman on the left is drawn almost entirely in red chalk, with quick additions and revisions in black. The artist focused on the silky sheen of her skirt and the volume conveyed by the crisp folds. The man seeking to embrace her is drawn in extraordinary shorthand. He appears almost as a ghost, details of costume suppressed in favour of fluid contours expressing movement. The figure of the woman to the right exploits the painterly potential of the chalk in a completely different way. Her clothing is drawn mostly in black chalk, her head and hands in red. Touches of white pull out highlights on her collar and sleeve, while stripes on her hem are added in red.'

With the figures seen slightly from below, it has been suggested that this drawing may represent *commedia dell'arte* actors on a stage. The dresses are akin to those worn by dancers of the day, and the woman at right appears to be executing a ballet movement. In 1697, during the reign of Louis XIV, performances of the *Comédie Italienne*, the Paris-based troupe of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, were officially banned. By the time Watteau had been admitted to the *Académie Royale* in 1717, however, the King had died and the Regent, Philippe, Duc d'Orléans, had invited the Italian actors back to Paris to re-establish the *Comédie Italienne*. As Margaret Morgan Grasselli has pointed out, 'The theater was a prime source of inspiration for Watteau throughout his career...he sometimes

painted scenes from known plays, but more often he blurred the line between the stage and his painted “real” world by including easily recognizable stage characters...in scenes of love and wooing that resemble in many ways his fêtes galantes.’

This drawing has been dated to c.1718 by Grasselli and Marianne Roland Michel, while Pierre Rosenberg and Louis-Antoine Prat prefer a slightly earlier date of around 1717. In their 1996 catalogue raisonné of Watteau’s drawings, Rosenberg and Prat noted in particular of the present sheet ‘the extraordinary freedom of the silhouette of the gallant embracing the woman at the left. This figure is entirely drawn in red chalk, with a repetition of her bodice in black chalk, as an overdrawing, while the other young woman is treated in roughly the opposite manner. The beauty of the mise en page, and the balance between the figures, is quite remarkable.’ Rosenberg and Prat further relate this drawing stylistically to a study of three women in red chalk in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, which they suggest may have been drawn at the same time and perhaps even at the same session.

As Martin Eidelberg has justly written of Watteau’s figure drawings, ‘Beyond the elegance of posture and costumes are the deeper emotions of his figures. However we interpret their mood, as happy or nostalgic, it must be said they are intensely alive, physically and spiritually. One is attracted by their wit and vivacity, by the sense of the fleeting moment of their existence.’ And, as Stein has written of the present sheet, ‘Like many of Watteau’s figure studies, the emphasis here is on neither anatomy nor costume but on the shades of social nuance present in the gestures and body language. The two halves of the sheet do not share a unified space but create a mise-en-page of simultaneous balance and tension. Although the figures were not used in any known painting, their expressiveness, with sparkling execution and palpable sense of movement, evokes the amorous mood and elegance of a fête galante.’

The present sheet was one of around fifteen drawings by Watteau that were once in the collection of Raoul Dastrac (1891-1969), a painter and collector.

### **Exhibitions**

Paris, Galerie Cailleux, *Le dessin français de Watteau à Prudhon*, 1951, no.163; Paris, Galerie Cailleux, *Watteau et sa génération*, 1968, no.58; New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Watteau, Music, and Theater*, 2009, no.27.

### **Literature:**

K. T. Parker and Jacques Mathey, *Antoine Watteau: Catalogue complet de son oeuvre dessiné*, Paris, 1957, Vol. II, p.310, no.553, fig.553; Gérard Bauer, *Dessins français du dix-huitième siècle: La figure humaine*, Paris, 1959, pl.14; Marianne Roland Michel, *Watteau: An Artist of the Eighteenth Century*, London, 1984, p.136, illustrated in colour p.143, pl.XXIX; Pierre Rosenberg and Louis-Antoine Prat, *Antoine Watteau: Catalogue raisonné des dessins*, Milan, 1996, Vol.II, pp.924-925, no.546; ‘Six Drawings by Antoine Watteau from a French Private Collection (Lots 165-170). Watteau and his Collectors’, in London, Christie’s, *Old Master Drawings*, 6 July 1999, p.159; Katherine Baetjer, ed., *Watteau, Music, and Theater*, exhibition catalogue, New York, 2009, pp.76-77, no.27 (entry by Perrin Stein).

### **Artist description:**

Born in the northern French city of Valenciennes, Jean-Antoine Watteau arrived in Paris around 1702, and there studied with Claude Gillot and, later, Claude III Audran. Gillot's particular influence is seen in some of Watteau's earliest works, which depicted scenes from the commedia dell'arte; a popular feature of street life in Paris. In 1709, at the age of twenty-five, he won a second prize in the Prix de Rome competition at the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. Perhaps disappointed with losing the chance to study in Italy, Watteau returned to his native Valenciennes for a year. After his return to Paris, accompanied by his pupil Jean-Baptiste Pater, he was provisionally received (agrée) into the Académie in 1712, and was invited to submit a painting as his reception piece. This morceau de réception, however, was not presented to the Academy for another five years, with the result that Watteau was only admitted (reçu) as a full Academician in 1717, with his painting *The Pilgrimage to the Island of Cythera*. He was, in fact, admitted as a painter of fêtes galantes; a genre created by the Académie especially for him. By this time Watteau was already quite successful, and counted among his patrons and supporters Pierre Crozat, whose superb collection of Old Master drawings he was able to study at length, as well as Count Carl Gustaf Tessin and the Duc d'Arenberg. In 1719 he spent a year in England, where he painted two works for the physician and collector Richard Mead, and on his return to France in 1720 lived for some time with his friend, the art dealer Edmé-François Gersaint. Already in poor health after his return from London, he died the following year.