Perl begins by inviting us to acknowledge Watteau’s artistic genius and partake in his creation of fêtes galantes (scenes of idyllic charm) with a discerning eye. Throughout Perl’s ‘alphabet’, we seen Watteau’s influence throughout the centuries and across the Western hemisphere has loomed large. Perl credits Watteau with revitilizing classic dramaticism in painting, while simultaneously crafting complex emotional scenes in a boldly Rococo style. Watteau traversed in, around, and through several artistic genres during his short career (b.1684-d.1721). He worked quickly, independently, and in varying mediums, choosing to devote his time to painting, prints, and chalk on whatever subjects he chose. The subjects he chose most often were pastroal scenes with lovers and the characters of the commedia dell’arte, Harlequin and Pierrot. Though his works appear to be frivolous at first glance, Perl emphasizes that Watteau created works of melancholy, ambiguity, desire, and contemplation. Watteau is credited now with having a major influence on poetry, film, theatre, dance, and the decorative arts. Perl takes us through these various influences via his alphabet, chronicling letters about Watteau, stories that involved the artist directly, and personal additions that he feels add depth and understanding to Watteau as an important art history figure. “Portrait of Antoine Watteau” by Rosalba Carriera, 1721, pastel on paper, courtesy of www.wikipaintings.org.
Discussion

1. New York Times critics have deemed this book a “love letter”, and not very much a “prosaic study” (Richard Woodward, NY Times, Nov. 7, 2008). Are you a fan of Perl’s style?

2. Did you know of Watteau prior to reading this? If not, were you interested to find out more after reading this?

3. Do you agree that Watteau “practically invented the bohemian imagination”?

4. What was your favorite alphabetical entry?

5. What was your least favorite alphabetical entry?

6. On p.126, Perl states that “what is truly new in art is a strong emotional inflection”. Can you think of artistic examples that support this? Examples that refute this?

7. On page 13 Perl states, “He (Watteau) is the master of the in-between situations, less interested in life as a stage than in the preparations for going onstage or how actors feel after they’ve made their exits.” What does Perl mean by this? How is this statement reflected in Watteau’s work?

8. In the New York Review of Books, the following was written regarding Watteau:

 “[He was] the pictorial apostle of the great rush to hedonism that French society permitted itself after Louis XIV finally expired in 1715 -- the period known as the Regency (since the new king was in his minority), marked by its reckless free-spending, constant partying, and satire, with the banned commedia dell’arte returning to town. All of which Watteau himself half-acknowledged in his final bow to that society, Gersaint’s Shopsign – in which we see a shophand unceremoniously packing away a portrait of the gloomy old grand monarque, disdained by a clientele far more interested in exquisite consumer desirables”. (Julian Bell, NY Review of Books, January 26, 2009).

The meaning behind these individual pieces is not fully explained by Perl. What other historical events would have influenced Watteau’s artistic choices?

Further reading


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